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The New Criterion

June 1989

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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HELEN FRANKENTHALER *A Paintings Retrospective* will be on view at the Museum of Modern Art from June 1st through August 20th. The exhibition will thereafter travel to the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, the Los Angeles County Museum and the Detroit Institute of Arts. Illustrated above is *Garden Maze*, 1952, oil on canvas, 58 x 51½ inches (147 x 131 cm). Helen Frankenthaler is represented by the André Emmerich Gallery, 41 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022. Tel. (212) 752-0124. Fax 212 371 7345

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Joseph Epstein's latest book of essays, *Partial Payments,* has been published by Norton.

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Jed Perl's book, *Paris Without End,* has been published by North Point Press.

Robert Richman is the editor of *The Direction of Poetry,* published by Houghton Mifflin.

C. H. Sisson's most recent book of poetry is *God Bless Karl Marx,* published in 1987 by Carcanet.

William Jay Smith is the author of *The Traveler's Tree* (Persea).

Deborah Solomon is writing a biography of Joseph Cornell, to be published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

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Sidney Wade's poetry has appeared in *Grand Street* and *The New Yorker.*

Karen Wilkin reviewed Robert L. Herbert's *Impressionism* for our March issue.

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Notes on early American modernism

by Hilton Kramer

We had been sponging on Europe for direction instead of developing our own, and Europe had been handing out nice little packages of spiritual direction to us. But then Europe fell into disorder and lost her way [with the World War], *and we were thrown back on ourselves to find inside ourselves sustaining faith.*
—Paul Rosenfeld, in *Port of New York*, 1924

The course traced by the history of early modernist art in the United States is a subject that seems to grow more complicated and less amenable to easy summary or any agreed-upon critical judgment the more we come to know the art itself in greater depth and to acquire a keener understanding of both its aesthetic merits and the cultural circumstances in which it was produced. Some of us can recall a time—it wasn't in our earliest youth, either—when the very mention of certain names, Marsden Hartley's or Alfred Maurer's, for example, elicited nothing but a look of incomprehension or supercilious disdain from people who prided themselves on their up-to-date critical opinions. If such dismissals are no longer as automatic as they once were, if indeed there is now a tendency to overrate certain figures in that first generation of American modernists—Georgia O'Keeffe, for instance—this does not mean that we have come into possession of a real grasp of what the artistic achievement of that generation actually was. Or, for that matter, of what its very real failures were. We nowadays see much more of the art than used to be possible, and we see it in circumstances that accord it greater respect than was hitherto the case except among a very small circle of dedicated connoisseurs. But the literature of early American modernism is still marked, for the most part, by an absence of intellectual rigor and a woeful lack of historical imagination. The same stale assumptions, even some of the same misinformation, tend to be recycled from study to study, and whatever new thinking is applied to the subject now is more likely to derive from the new methodologies of social history, which is to say politics, than from the kind of aesthetic intelligence that might illuminate the art in question. There are exceptions, to be sure, but they are rare; and because they do not, as a rule, emanate from positions of institutional power, either in the museums or in the academy, they have not yet succeeded in redirecting the attention of the field to the fundamental artistic issues that were of compelling concern to the artists themselves.

It is for this reason that the exhibition recently organized at Brown University under the title "Over Here: Modernism, The First Exile 1914-1919,"[1] proved to have an interest somewhat larger than the size of the

1 "Over Here: Modernism, The First Exile 1914-1919" was shown at the David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, in Providence, Rhode Island, from April 15 to May 29.

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show might have led one to expect. Neither the exhibition nor the accompanying catalogue produced by Professor Kermit S. Champa in collaboration with his colleagues and his graduate students was in any sense definitive of the subject it addressed, which was the art created by American modernists during the First World War. But to isolate the modernist work produced here during the war, the coming of which effectively terminated the period of firsthand contact with the European avant-garde that many of the artists had enjoyed as expatriates and that played such a crucial role in their own artistic development, *is* an act of historical imagination, and now that such an exhibition has been done, however imperfectly, it seems odd that it hadn't been done before. After all, we have been living for nearly four decades in the aftermath of another such period, 1940-45, in which enforced restrictions on international travel together with the emigration of certain European modernists to our shores resulted in a similarly fateful re-examination of our own artistic culture.

The parallels that obtain between these two important chapters in twentieth-century American art, 1914-19 and 1940-45, should not be exaggerated. They occurred at very different periods in the development of the European avant-garde, and they resulted in very different kinds of artistic achievement. Whereas in 1914 the modernist movement in European art was at its height, in 1940 it was seriously depleted, and that made a great difference in the kind of aesthetic opportunities that American artists could be made to feel were available to them. Yet the parallels are nonetheless real. The observation I have quoted as an epigraph to this article from Paul Rosenfeld's *Port of New York*, written exactly a decade after the commencement of the First World War and in full consciousness of what the war had meant to that first generation of American modernists, could just as aptly be applied to the artists who created the New York School during the difficult years of the Second World War. In both cases, American artists were compelled to take stock of where they stood in relation to the European modernists they most admired, and to align what was most usable to them in European art with what they took to be the essential elements of American experience.

The artists represented in the "Over Here" exhibition were, with few exceptions, the ones we would expect to find in such a survey. The three principal European émigrés—Marcel Duchamp, Albert Gleizes, and Francis Picabia—were in, Gleizes with an over-schematized *hommage* to the Brooklyn Bridge that, despite its weakness as a painting, is a perfect embodiment of the spirit that reigned among the New York modernists at that moment. (In an interview in *The New York Tribune*, Gleizes compared the Brooklyn Bridge to Notre Dame de Paris.) The presence in this exhibition of a painting of an American subject that is so deeply rooted in Parisian taste had the effect, moreover, of reminding us of the distance that already separated certain of the American modernists from a strictly French influence. In some cases—Marsden Hartley and Lyonel Feininger, most particularly—the influence is emphatically more German than French. In others—Joseph Stella, for example—the combined precedents of Robert Delaunay and the Italian Futurists served as a guide to a quintessentially American (or should one say New York?) iconography. This is not to deny that Paris exerted a tremendous influence on these American modernists, yet even where the tie is most direct—in Max Weber's Cubo-Futurist pastel of the Woolworth building, say, or in Alfred Maurer's *Abstract Still Life*—something very un-Parisian, something that has to be identified as a New York sensibility, is nonetheless emphatically present. It is triumphantly present in the exquisite watercolors of Charles Demuth. Whether this is to be accounted for by the isolation imposed by the war or by some larger and deeper current in American culture itself—in the heady promise that these modernists discerned in the swiftly

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evolving cultural life of the time—it would be difficult to say. No doubt both played a crucial role in the way European precedent was absorbed into what very quickly emerged as an American point of view.

In this transformation, Alfred Stieglitz and his "291" circle occupied a central place, and one of the most illuminating components of the "Over Here" show was its reconstruction of the "291" exhibition style. In one corner of the show, we were given a glimpse of the way Stieglitz exhibited the photographs—his own and those of Paul Strand—that were very much a part of the American modernist movement. In the early Stuart Davis paintings we were also given a glimpse of the intense allegiance to modernism that the movement had already elicited in a younger generation in this period. No doubt we shall have a better view of this development when the Metropolitan Museum mounts its Davis retrospective next year, but the pictures shown here—especially the marvelous *Studio Interior* of 1917—firmly establish Davis's place in this history.

At almost every turn in the "Over Here" exhibition we were reminded of how much more we have lately learned about which artists really counted in this effort to establish a distinctly American modernist sensibility in art. The paintings of Morton Schamberg and Patrick Henry Bruce, the sculpture of John Storrs, the painted reliefs of John Covert (who was also represented by some strange photographs of nudes never before exhibited), the color abstractions of Morgan Russell, even the early modernist pictures of Thomas Hart Benton—in these and other works in the show, we were given a sense of how significantly our understanding of American modernism has been enlarged by the exhibitions and publications that have been devoted to these figures in recent years. It is not that the central figures—Hartley, Dove, Marin, et al.—have been nudged aside. Far from it—though in the future, I think, both Weber and O'Keeffe are likely to occupy a smaller place than has heretofore been the case. But there can be no question about the way our understanding of the whole movement has been enlarged, and the "Over Here" show splendidly reflected this very real change.

As for the ambitious catalogue that Professor Champa and his associates have produced to accompany the show, it raises many more questions than can be addressed here—many more, indeed, than it attempts to answer. I could certainly have done without the very silly feminist analysis of the writings of Arthur Jerome Eddy and Willard Huntington Wright. There are many reasons why we should be reminded of just how good a writer on modernist art Wright, for example, was. But to reduce the criticism of this interesting figure to a question of gender is a ghastly academic frivolity. Far more illuminating is the attention that Professor Champa and his colleagues pay to the modernist music that occupied so important a place in the cultural life of this period—a more important place, actually, than modernist art had any hope of achieving at that time. The principal focus here is on Scriabin, whose *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire* was given its world premiere in New York in 1915, but Professor Champa also reminds us that no less a figure than H. L. Mencken spoke at this time of Wagner's *Ring* as "an even greater achievement in the culture of art than the Acropolis in Athens."

It is indeed startling to recall just how important modern music was in the artistic life of the time, but the question raised by this important subject—namely, how did it happen that in the course of time this interest in modern music dramatically receded while the interest in modernist art expanded in a way that far exceeded the wildest dreams of the American artists who created it?—remains to be explored. That question lies beyond the scope of the "Over Here" exhibition, of course. But when we have set ourselves the task of explaining how and why this momentous reversal of cultural priorities occurred, we shall have a deeper understanding of the modernism that this interesting exhibition made an attempt to explore.

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Politics and art in the criticism of F. O. Matthiessen

by James W. Tuttleton

Down with non-partisan writers!
—V. I. Lenin

At the time of his suicide in 1950, the Harvard professor F. O. Matthiessen was one of the most influential figures in the development of the academic criticism of American literature. Others—like Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, William Empson and R. P. Blackmur, F. R. Leavis and Lionel Trilling—had greater critical authority and commanded a larger audience of intelligent and cultivated readers. But they were part of a wider cultural world. Matthiessen was pre-eminently a man of the university. Even so, his literary influence radiated from his own classroom and writing into the lectures and seminars of others, and from there to generations of students of American literature. Why is he worth remembering?

After the impressionistic study *Sarah Orne Jewett* in 1929 and Eliotic reflections on *Translation: An Elizabethan Art* in 1931, Matthiessen turned his full attention to American literature and attained great influence with *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot: An Essay on the Nature of Poetry* (1935) and *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941). According to Lewis Leary in *American Literature: A Study and Research Guide*, *American Renaissance* was "perhaps the single most influential study of literature in America at the middle of the nineteenth century." It did "more than any other book," as Richard Brodhead has observed, "to set the [nineteenth-century] American canon as it would be taught in American universities after World War II." Widely praised for its magisterial treatment of the greatest masters of the era (Hawthorne, Melville, Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman), *American Renaissance* shaped the thinking of Matthiessen's distinguished students (including Kenneth Lynn, Quentin Anderson, Henry Nash Smith, Leo Marx, and R. W. B. Lewis) and of many others as well. I can clearly recollect its impact on my own graduate studies in 1955; it is a book that I still recommend to students today.

Matthiessen also made other useful contributions with *Henry James: The Major Phase* (1944). This book persuasively argued the case that James's supreme accomplishment was the creation of the late novels in the complicated mandarin style. With Kenneth Murdock he edited *The Notebooks of Henry James* (1947), and in that year he compiled *The James Family: A Group Biography*, interweaving illuminating critical commentary with generous selections from the writings of Henry James, Sr., and his sons, the psychologist William and the novelist Henry. Matthiessen's autobiographical book *From the Heart of Europe* (1948) was widely reviewed. Chosen over any number of well-known living poets, he also edited *The Oxford Book of American Verse* (1950). And at his death he left a virtually

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completed critical study, published shortly afterward as *Theodore Dreiser* (1951). Such was Matthiessen's influence that it is perhaps only forgivable hyperbole to say—as William E. Cain does in his new book, *F. O. Matthiessen and the Politics of Criticism*[1]—that "probably more than any other modern critic, F. O. Matthiessen legitimated the study of American literature."

Cain, who is a professor of English and director of American studies at Wellesley College, is not the first to have examined the career of Matthiessen. In the year of Matthiessen's suicide, Paul M. Sweezy and Leo Huberman edited *F. O. Matthiessen (1902-1950): A Collective Portrait,* composed of laudatory reminiscences by friends and former students. But such was the numbing effect of Matthiessen's death that it took twenty-five years before a major study of the critic appeared—Giles B. Gunn's *F. O. Matthiessen: The Critical Achievement* (1975). Since then, however, the bibliography has picked up. Editor Louis Hyde has made Matthiessen's private life accessible in *Rat and the Devil: Journal Letters of F. O. Matthiessen and Russell Cheney* (1978). In *F. O. Matthiessen: Christian Socialist as Critic* (1981), Frederick C. Stern undertook to explain why Matthiessen was exemplary for "those of us who thought of ourselves as radicals in the late forties and very early fifties"; and Walter Benn Michaels and Donald E. Pease felt Matthiessen's influence important enough to have assembled a collection of new revaluations in *The American Renaissance Reconsidered* (1985).

Cain also wishes to reconsider Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* by indicting it as a case study in what, as a critic, one must not do. The arraignment comes down to this:

> As a Christian socialist, [Matthiessen] dedicated his life's work to fighting against the industrial-capitalist order and all that it had done to all aspects of life. Yet in his actual academic and critical activity, Matthiessen placed himself in a literary and political fix. Refusing to allow his politics to propel his critical agenda, he put the critical agenda first, making the formalist approach and method his central focus. He claimed to be moving beyond the disabling apolitical and ahistorical limitations set by formalism; and he made this claim even as he persistently invoked and remained obeisant to New Critical, formalist principles . . . .

In consequence, Cain believes, Matthiessen's several critical studies—especially *American Renaissance*—are vitiated by an intellectual and critical confusion.

Since Cain makes much of the contradiction between Matthiessen's criticism and his politics and has touched on this in relation to his suicide, some attention to the critic's socialist views and his disturbing death may be in order here.

Francis Otto Matthiessen was born in Pasadena, California, in 1902, one of four children in an unsettled family, and he lived, off and on, with his millionaire grandfather in LaSalle, Illinois, which he regarded as his real home. After four years at the Hackley School in Tarrytown, New York, he took his B.A. degree at Yale in 1923 and went on to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. With a Harvard M.A. in 1926 and a Ph.D. in 1927, he taught at Yale for two years and then returned to Harvard, where he held a faculty appointment until his death in 1950.

Troubled by the disparity between his privileged status and the spectacle of poverty, young Matthiessen, during the Depression, was converted to the views of Eugene Debs and Norman Thomas; he joined the Socialist Party in 1932. In *From the Heart of Europe*, he confessed that R. H. Tawney's defense of equality and attack on industrialism in *The Acquisitive Society* "have remained more living for me than anything else, except Shakespeare, that I read at college." Matthiessen then threw himself with enthusiasm into very nearly every public

1 *F. O. Matthiessen and the Politics of Criticism*, by William E. Cain; University of Wisconsin Press, 238 pages, $37.50.

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left-wing radical cause around—of which the following is a highly selective list of the organizations and defense committees he supported: the American Russian Institute, the Artists' Front to Win the War, American Youth for Democracy, Citizens' Committee to Free Earl Browder, Civil Rights Congress, Committee for Citizenship Rights, Committee for a Democratic Far East Policy, Committee to Sponsor the Daily Worker, Defense of Communist Schools, Open Letter for Closer Cooperation with the Soviet Union, Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, and the Win-the-Peace Conference. Needless to say, many of these groups were Communist fronts. Further, as Cain remarks, Matthiessen "campaigned tirelessly for the Progressive party, and presented one of the seconding speeches for Henry Wallace's nomination in 1948"—even though the Wallace campaign had been substantially co-opted by the Communist Party.

Such was the certitude of his blind faith in socialism that Matthiessen in 1948 could still call the Russian Revolution "the most progressive event of our century, the necessary successor to the French Revolution and the American Revolution and to England's seventeenth-century Civil War." He defended the Soviet Union long after Stalin's atrocities had been revealed, and as late as 1949 could contend, in "The Responsibilities of the Critic," that "the principles of Marxism remain at the base of much of the best social and cultural thought of our century."

Naturally opinions and attitudes of this kind brought Matthiessen to the attention of the authorities, for the late 1940s were a time when Communist infiltration of the universities and subversion of the government were inflamed political topics. When he was called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee, he proudly claimed his membership in the organizations named above. No legal action was ever brought against him. Nevertheless, in a revealing chronological juxtaposition, Cain remarks that "Matthiessen killed himself less than two months after Senator Joseph McCarthy's notorious February 1950 speech . . . in which he announced that Communists had crept into the State Department and 'thoroughly infested' it." Cain quotes a view, widely promulgated in the 1950s by the Left and here voiced by Barrows Dunham in *F. O. Matthiessen (1902-1950): A Collective Portrait*, that "when Professor Matthiessen died, the cold war made its first martyr among scholars." Was Matthiessen, in his suicide, a noble victim of right-wing McCarthyist oppression?

It may be the case, as Cain speculates, that "everything to which Matthiessen had dedicated his intellectual life . . . seemed in danger of being lost forever amid the rush to purge the nation of its political enemies." But he is candid enough to admit that Matthiessen had enemies on the Left as well as on the Right. The chief of these were former Communists and other anti-Stalinists of the Left. In particular, there was outrage on the Left at Matthiessen's distorted picture of the political situation in Czechoslovakia. He had spent 1947 teaching at the Charles University in Prague and came home to write about the sublime faith of "the majority of the people [who] are committed to the belief that socialism will work." Of course the majority of the people thought no such thing; and the Czech Communists and their Kremlin masters knew it. So in February of 1948 the Communists simply seized power in a *coup d'etat* and murdered—by defenestration—the foreign minister, Jan Masaryk. (The Czech Communists called Masaryk's death a suicide.) Matthiessen could have rewritten, in the proofs of *From the Heart of Europe*, his inappropriate account of the country, but he didn't even bother to change the book. Ernest J. Simmons has remarked that Matthiessen's failure to revise the proofs seemed "a psychic symbol of defeat. It was not merely the gesture of a tired man, but of one who wished to cling to a last illusion that had seemed the only way out of an aching ideological impasse." Matthiessen had nothing to say about the brutalization of the

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Czechs by Stalin's henchmen. Alfred Kazin, who had counted himself as a friend, said later that he had told Matthiessen that

> some of his attachments [were] naïve and dangerous. I could never understand—or wished not to understand—how anyone who adhered so firmly to democracy, and was a Christian, could countenance the contempt of individual differences, the terror, and the suppressiveness practiced by Russia and its vassals in Eastern Europe.

Despite this criticism, Matthiessen was hostile to leftist intellectuals, particularly Granville Hicks and John Dos Passos, who in the late 1940s had retired "to a neo-liberalism which has no group adherences, a liberalism wholly of the mind." He further complained in *From the Heart of Europe* that

> when all the forces on the Left are as weak in numbers as they are in America, it seems hardly less than suicidal to waste so much of their energy in attacking one another. The Trotskyite-Stalinist struggle, when transferred to New York, has yielded, to judge by the total record of the chief writers involved, little more than sterile though heated debate, followed by a wearied disillusionment with all politics on the part of many who once believed that they stood farthest to the militant Left.

At this Irving Howe issued a blistering *Partisan Review* attack on Matthiessen's *From the Heart of Europe*. In "The Sentimental Fellow-Travelling of F. O. Matthiessen," Howe claimed that Matthiessen's support of Wallace and the Progressive Party—which he called a "completely contrived creature of Stalinism"—proved him to be a Stalinist dupe. Matthiessen was "a writer who calls himself a democratic socialist while apologizing for the regimes that have jailed, exiled, and murdered democratic socialists." In short, he was "an apologist for a brutal totalitarian state and its agents."

What these controversies suggest is that Matthiessen's suicidal depression might just as well have come from attacks on the Left as from those on the Right. Matthiessen's death, in any case, became, as Kazin put it, a "political football" in which the radical Left claimed him as an academic martyr for his political opinions and the Right saw his suicide as positive evidence of his subversive un-Americanism, perhaps even of covert espionage. None of these explanations, however, will suffice. Another must therefore be sought.

F. O. Matthiessen, it must be said, was a homosexual and a Christian. Despite the Church's clear moral condemnation of homosexual acts, in 1924 he commenced a long homosexual affair with Russell Cheney, a painter twenty years his senior. Matthiessen's Christianity and his homosexuality, however, did not rest easily together. As he told "Rat" Cheney in one of his letters, "I don't want to mortify my flesh or deny anything for the sake of a future reward . . . . I worship Christ, but I follow him in the spirit, not in the letter." The nature of this affair is now more or less embarrassingly accessible in Lewis Hyde's edition of *Rat and the Devil: Journal Letters of F. O. Matthiessen and Russell Cheney*. But the relationship was not without its problems, partly compounded, it would seem, by Matthiessen's negative view of himself as a homosexual. In their entry on Matthiessen in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, Joseph H. and U. T. M. Summers remark that Matthiessen "was unusually hostile to homosexual colleagues [at Harvard] who mixed their academic and sexual relations." And indeed, if we look at his treatment of Whitman's sexual inversion in *American Renaissance*, Matthiessen was clearly uncomfortable with Whitman's openly avowed love of manly comrades. Matthiessen complains that "in the passivity of the poet's body there is a quality vaguely pathological and homosexual," as if conceding that the two were identical. Cain reflects that

> Matthiessen cannot engage this aspect of Whitman's verse except to criticize it or to

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> distance himself from it, and the effect, for those who know Matthiessen's own sexual preference, is quite disorienting. His critical gestures in the public form of his book feel like expressions of self-disapproval, as though he wanted not to be what Whitman was, or else wanted readers who knew he was homosexual to see that he spurned "abnormal" homosexual attitudes in poetry.

In any case, Matthiessen became increasingly obsessed that Cheney would die, that death would deprive him of his companion, and in 1938—well before the McCarthy era—he experienced an especially acute episode of depression and committed himself to McLean's Hospital in Boston for three weeks. As Cain remarks, "His letters and journal entries from this period show him extremely tense and exhausted, self-loathing and suicidal." His obsession with suicide, as Matthiessen himself describes it in his journal, "took agonizingly vivid images of jumping out of a window during those first tortured days." He felt that he had every reason to live, yet was impelled toward death:

> Where has this fear come from to engulf one who has never even been bothered by anxiety and worry before? If I dread life without Russell, the fact is that he is alive, buoyant, rich, and I am merely hastening by my melancholy the event that might lie far in the future, for this strain is very hard for him . . . . The nub of the problem is here. When you give yourself entirely to love, you cannot demand that it last forever. For then fear intrudes, and there I am.

His psychiatrist, however, put it differently. He told him that he was turning aggression against himself, and Matthiessen "resolved to fight it."

> I cannot die because it would kill Russell. And to keep from jumping I must cast out this fear of Russell's death. Many times in these past weeks I have felt possessed with a devil. I pray now for strength of nerve and courage to resist the temptation of violent unreason.

Matthiessen succeeded for a time in suppressing his fear of Cheney's death and resumed his life as a Harvard professor. But there is no doubt that he remained a depressed personality morbidly awaiting the death of his lover. And when Cheney did die, in 1945, Matthiessen's familiar world began to fall apart. In 1948, the year Masaryk was thrown out of a window in the Czech-Communist putsch and the unrevised proofs of *From the Heart of Europe* lay on his desk, Matthiessen complained of the need of some rest that would "pull me out of a spell of oppressive melancholy over the state of the world and myself." And in his farewell letter to Lewis Hyde, written the night before his death, he said: "I can't seem to find my way out of this desperate depression. I'd try to stick it out, if I didn't think it would recur . . . . I have fought it until I'm worn out. I can no longer bear the loneliness with which I am faced." On April 1, 1950, he leaped from the window of a twelfth-floor room in the Manger Hotel in Boston. He left a note in which he said:

> I have taken this room in order to do what I have to do . . . . I am exhausted. I have been subject to so many severe depressions during the past few years that I can no longer believe that I can continue to be of use to my profession and my friends . . . . How much the state of the world has to do with my state of mind I do not know. But as a Christian and a socialist believing in international peace, I find myself terribly oppressed by the present tensions.

What can we conclude about the poignant fact of Matthiessen's death? In my view, the evidence is not convincing that he was so distraught over public criticism, from either the Left or the Right, that he took his own life. He was, after all, an ardent activist used to political battles. Nor, despite his comments on the state of the world in 1950, can I see his dashed hope for international peace and the triumph of worldwide socialism as the key to his death. (One is struck, however, by the parallel in the

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manner of his own death and that of Jan Masaryk.) Matthiessen's suicidal impulse probably had its origins in an emotional state of self-loathing, confusingly and inextricably connected with his homosexuality. Yet it is probably the case that if Cheney had still been alive, Matthiessen might have pulled out of his depression, as he had earlier. But with Cheney now gone, he could not fight his depression alone. Wallace Stevens was probably right in remarking to a correspondent that "at the bottom of the whole thing there was something entirely personal," and that "when a man's trouble comes down to the final intimacy he just doesn't give anyone access to it."

It is Cain's thesis that, when F.O. Matthiessen sat down to write his criticism, he silenced his politics. Nevertheless, the increasing militancy of Matthiessen's socialism during the Depression and World War II years is clearly reflected in his changing treatment of certain American writers. In 1929, for instance, Matthiessen had written in *Sarah Orne Jewett* that "if the [literary] material is important and the technique crude, the work will continue to have historical value, such as even the clumsiest Dreiser novels will have in throwing light upon their time, but they are not works of art." But by the mid-1940s, when he launched *Theodore Dreiser*, the novelist's left-wing politics coincided with Matthiessen's and redeemed the crudity of his fictional technique. According to Lionel Trilling, Matthiessen's 1946 review of Dreiser's *The Bulwark* accepted "the liberal cliché which opposes crude experience to mind and establishes Dreiser's value by implying that the mind which Dreiser's crude experience is presumed to confront and refute is the mind of gentility." Later, in the Dreiser book, the novelist is praised for a number of reasons that have nothing to do with art; and when Matthiessen turns from the writer's compassion for the underclass to *aesthetic* considerations, we read that the lumbering and overblown *An American Tragedy* "advances magisterially from beginning to end"; that "one gets an increasing sense of the rightness of Dreiser's overall proportions"; and that "the qualifications that clog the prose are also a chief source of Dreiser's strength."

It is no wonder that in *The Liberal Imagination* Trilling called grotesque the "doctrinaire indulgence" with which Dreiser was treated by leftist critics like Matthiessen. According to Giles B. Gunn, "because of his intense concern to demonstrate Dreiser's relevance, Matthiessen was willing to dull the edge of his own critical instrument in order to make Dreiser's virtues stand out more boldly and unambiguously." To have transmogrified Dreiser's literary defects into novelistic virtues must have cost a critic with Matthiessen's aesthetic sensibility quite a great deal. In fact, Gunn cites a former friend of Matthiessen's who "suggested in private that Matthiessen's work on the Dreiser book is what finally drove him to suicide." Did he take his life because he had compromised his aesthetic standards in the service of a socialist ideology? Gunn finds the suggestion highly implausible. So does Cain. In fact, for Cain, the real problem—putting aside for the moment the ambiguous cause of his suicide—is not the compromise of Matthiessen's aesthetic standards but the compromise of his political ideology, especially in *American Renaissance*. Let us turn now to Cain's critique of the way in which the political and literary contradictions in Matthiessen's thought disabled *American Renaissance*.

By way of a preliminary, I must say that I have a great deal of sympathy with Cain's view of the current critical scene in American letters. He remarks that, to an outsider, the "poststructuralist probings of texts from *Hamlet* to *Ulysses*" looks impressive in its technical density, but he remarks that "it is incomprehensible and unrelated to the needs and interests of people who do not make their living 'doing criticism.'" Cain is sharply critical of "Derridean forays into the antics of metaphor and metonymy in Poe's poetry, or Lacanian meditations on the signifier in Melville's tales." The preoccupa-

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tion in English departments with Continental theories has, in his opinion, diverted American critics from the real task:

> If we ever hope to justify teaching and writing about literature; if we seek in fact to give the humanities a marked relevance to American society; if we want our constituencies to value what we do, then we should take as a central mission a renewed commitment to informing ourselves and our students about the literature, philosophy, and history of the United States.

I, for one, am in substantial agreement with this viewpoint, as I believe F. O. Matthiessen would have been. But, as will become clearer, I cannot assent to the conclusion that Cain derives from it or the judgment he is led to pass on Matthiessen's criticism.

Despite the deplorable betrayal of his critical standards in the book on Dreiser, Matthiessen essentially, and for most of his career, saw himself as a literary critic whose function was to serve the work of art by setting it in an appropriate context, elucidating its central themes and literary techniques, and evaluating the writer in terms of his literary excellence. In accomplishing this task, Matthiessen paid close attention to the form of literary works. A founder (with Trilling and Ransom) of the Kenyon School of English, Matthiessen even assigned Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Poetry* as a classroom text. Since Eliot and the New Critics dominated Matthiessen's early critical practice, it is not surprising that his first important work should have been *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot*. For Cain, however, Matthiessen was disabled by his commitment to the principles of the New Criticism, which emphasize the literary work as a verbal artifact, not fully separable from history but understandable through attention to its formal techniques—its structure, texture, tension, paradox, irony, and ambiguity.

Cain finds it ironical that "Matthiessen, a socialist, would look to T. S. Eliot, a royalist, as a compelling authority" and that he would "dispute the narrowness of New Critical methodology and also rebuke Agrarian conservatism, yet often sound decidedly like a New Critic himself in his remarks about his own approach to literature." For Cain, the critics "whom Matthiessen read closely" held "political assumptions [that] diverged sharply from Matthiessen's: these men were not democrats." Furthermore, how could a socialist have been so taken with mere art as to have written *Henry James: The Major Phase*, especially in view of James's aversion to radicals and reformers, as *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Casamassima* make plain? For Cain, Matthiessen's preoccupation with and appreciation for literary form produced inner contradictions that kept him from articulating, in his criticism, the socialist principles for which he stood.

American Renaissance is presented to us by Cain as a work celebrating "a literature for democracy." Matthiessen remarked that "the one common denominator of my five writers, uniting even Hawthorne and Whitman, was their devotion to the possibilities of democracy." But Cain complains that "he leaves the meaning of this 'democracy' oddly unparticularized." (Matthiessen did not, in other words, say that for him democracy meant socialism.) Further, Cain alleges that "Matthiessen's choices [of Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Melville] . . . were undemocratic" and unrepresentative of the taste of rank-and-file nineteenth-century readers. If we ask why, Cain enlists the support of fellow canon-buster Jane Tompkins, author of *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*, to spell out Matthiessen's errors. Here is her indictment:

> Matthiessen's list is exclusive and class-bound in the extreme. If you look at it carefully, you will see that in certain fundamental ways the list does not represent what most men and women were thinking about between 1850 and 1855, but embodies the views of a very small, socially, culturally, geographically, sexually, and racially restricted elite. None of the works . . . is by an orthodox Christian . . . . None deals explicitly with the issues of abolition and

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> temperance . . . . None . . . achieved great popular success . . . . The list includes no works by women, although women at that time dominated the literary marketplace. The list includes no works by males not of Anglo-Saxon origin, and indeed, no works by writers living south of New York, north of Boston, or west of Stockbridge, Massachusetts . . . .

Cain complains that it did not occur to Matthiessen that "by omitting [Harriet Beecher] Stowe and the women writers, he was going to end up with a list that was entirely male; and it apparently did not even enter his mind that the list was defective because it was wholly white." Looked at in retrospect, *American Renaissance* "is a book that is unfaithful to the full literary and historical actuality of the years when the 'American renaissance' bloomed." If Matthiessen "had really read and written about literature as a socialist, he would have produced a different sort of criticism."

It is worth pointing out, perhaps, that no single book could ever pretend to be faithful to the *full* literary and historical actuality of the mid-nineteenth century. Nor could any critical work of the 1930s, like *American Renaissance*, ever satisfy the 1980s orthodoxy of race-class-gender "oppression studies." The crux of Cain's objection, however, is broader than either of these points: it is that Matthiessen did not observe sexual and racial egalitarianism as a criterion for aesthetic selections. If *American Renaissance* suppressed Matthiessen's political ideology in the service of a largely formal literary analysis, Cain suggests that there is a better way for the professor to approach literature. This way is "to acknowledge one's political beliefs first, and then to make pedagogical decisions accordingly. If I claim to desire, and wish to work for, political change, then I should teach in line with my politics." Cain then confesses that "I foreground race in my teaching since, with [W. E. B.] Du Bois, I regard race 'as the central problem of the greatest of the world's democracies and so the problem of the future world.'" This is quite remarkable. I suppose that if Cain regarded the disposal of nuclear waste as our greatest political problem, then consistency would compel him to make this thesis the governing principle of his curriculum of American literature.

For Cain, Matthiessen was caught in contradictions because he insisted on literature as "a special category." Is there something wrong with distinguishing the excellent in writing as against the turbid flow of most discursive practice? There is for Cain. The reason is that our "'social thinking' keeps getting balked and deflected by our allegiance to 'literature as an art.'"

> This may be a fine loyalty, and many admirable men and women have supported it, but it is crucial to realize, as Matthiessen's scholarship confirms, how variable have been the boundaries that define "literature" and "art." It is simply historically wrong to speak as if literary art is, has always been, and will always be this or that particular thing. Matthiessen felt certain that he knew what literature was; yet when we read his books today, we notice right away the books (and constituencies) that lie outside his range of literary expertise and mission . . . . I prefer myself to begin, as I have emphasized, with present political interests and to proceed from there to choose writers and texts which I can examine with students to develop and express these interests.

The implications of this remark, for English studies, are, I must confess, appalling. No serious person in 1855 regarded the work of such female scribblers as Mrs. E. D. E. N. Southworth as art; and no one thought of the writings of Frederick Douglass or William Lloyd Garrison as literature. And no one, with any literary judgment, does now. Hence the need Cain feels to abolish literature as a special category so as to make a place for the subliterary writer whose works are politically "useful." Here is a professor of literature at a major undergraduate college, entrusted with the high obligation, indeed the very great privilege, of presenting to his students

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American literary art, yet baldly announcing the primacy of his political ideology, an ideology perhaps only of the moment, as the basis for his selection of literary texts. How ghastly for his students!

Given Cain's ideology of race, we cannot be in any doubt about the canon-busting to follow: "In defining my own canon, as I make choices among writers and texts, I stress four terms: dissent, struggle, vision, conflict." Dissent he illustrates by assigning the writings of Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison; struggle with C. L. R. James, Walter Rodney, Eric Williams, Frantz Fanon, and Amilcar Cabral; vision suggests to him Du Bois, Richard Wright, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X; and finally conflict brings into the curriculum Melville, Twain, and Faulkner—although only in relation to the racial theme. I note that there are no women, black or white, on the approved list, although elsewhere he is prescriptive: "A course on the American Renaissance [unlike Matthiessen's] ought to incorporate the writings of [Frederick] Douglass and [Harriet Beecher] Stowe." Nowhere in Cain's discussion of literature do we find any interest in such literary concepts as beauty and art, style and form. Instead, Cain ends his book with a long paean to the named black writers, especially to that "premier 'man of letters,'" W. E. B. Du Bois, who has "few rivals in this century" but who suffers neglect in English classes only because "his black skin still bars him" and because of "his Communist sympathies and eventual membership in the Communist party."

None of Cain's opinions about Du Bois's merit is defended on aesthetic grounds. Cain does, however, make his case worse by quoting Du Bois's "Criteria of Negro Art" to this effect: "Viewing himself as, in everything, a writer, an artist, he [Du Bois] affirmed that 'all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right for black folk to love and enjoy.'" When we contemplate the corruption of art that always occurs when it is conflated with propaganda, and when we reflect that, in fact, no one has ever denied blacks the "right" (is it a political right?) to "love and enjoy," Du Bois's imprecision of thought and language calls into question his ascribed pre-eminence. Cain himself seems a bit uneasy and evasive about his canon-busting, observing of his black writers that "one would want to call them 'great artists'" (note the conditional). But his political agenda wins out at last: "They are that." He is also uneasy that straight Marxists and radical white feminists will take him to task for his racial bias. But, good liberal that he is, he concedes that "others whose political views are similar to my own might prefer to focus upon gender and class, and on the intersections of race, class, and gender. Their choice of texts and methods will be different from, though complementary, to mine." In any case, for Cain, his black writers are really "relevant" and necessary substitutes for white American writers who subordinate race to universal human concerns.

In all of this one has a sickening sense of *déjà vu*, as if we were heading back into the vulgar Marxist sociology of literature that corrupted criticism in the 1930s, or at least back to the viewpoint of V. L. Parrington, who dismissively remarked in *Main Currents of American Thought* that "with aesthetic judgments I have not been greatly concerned. I have not wished to evaluate reputations or weigh literary merits, but rather to understand what our fathers thought." Matthiessen, for all his political confusion, at least understood what the art of literature is. He knew that it constitutes a special category of discourse. *Walden* had taught him about what Thoreau called "the select language of literature." Matthiessen understood that special techniques of literary criticism must be invoked if the art is to be understood. Matthiessen was sharply critical of Parrington, observing in the Preface to *American Renaissance* that "my concern has been the opposite [of Parrington's]." Matthiessen said that he was

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> suspicious of the results of such historians as have declared that they were not discussing art, but simply using art, in a purpose of research. Both our historical writing and our criticism have been greatly enriched during the past twenty years by the breaking down of arbitrary divisions between them, by the critic's realization of the necessity to master what he could of the historical discipline, by the historian's desire to extend his domain from politics to general culture. But you cannot "use" a work of art unless you have comprehended its meaning.

One cannot comprehend the meaning of a literary work, Matthiessen felt, unless its techniques are understood; and to this end, the New Critical methods threw the clearest light on what, in its ontological reality, the work of art is. At least when he wrote *American Renaissance*, Matthiessen had seen enough of the vulgar Marxists and historical sociologists of literature (who set their radical political agenda first) to realize the extent to which their propaganda distorted, falsified, and diminished actual artworks. Matthiessen did not wish to replicate the errors of 1930s left-wing criticism, which emanated from the shallowest historical relativism. And yet here is Cain advising us, like Lenin in "Party Organization and Party Literature," that, since literary judgments are relative and culture-bound, critics and teachers should always set their political agendas first and then decide what books are "art." Matthiessen, for all his limitations, was never guilty of that folly in *American Renaissance*.

But such folly is now rampant in the academy. A decade ago, Professor Florence Howe of CCNY demanded that scholars turn "their attention to research that is needed, that will make a difference." "Let us have no more dissertations on Henry James," she wrote, "or on Melville or Hawthorne: let us remember the ladies, those hordes of 'female scribblers' that Hawthorne feared." More recently, Professor Lawrence Buell of Oberlin, in a 1987 article in *American Literature* entitled "Literary History Without Sexism," called on feminist studies to "foment reorderings in the pre-feminist canon (the demotion of Hemingway, for instance)."

To the extent that *American Renaissance* is still useful, it is precisely because Matthiessen tried to be politically non-partisan. In subordinating his politics to his literary judgment, he selected only those writers who, on the basis of style and substance, made a compelling case for our *literary* attention, and he made that case persuasively. He learned from Emerson that only an artistic inspiration that has found its true organic form counts in the long run. He agreed with Thoreau in *Walden* that, "having learned our letters, we should read the best that is in literature." The New Criticism made Matthiessen a close and intelligent reader whose grasp of literature's complexity forbade him, at least in *American Renaissance*, the ideological oversimplification. That Matthiessen *did* make his case for Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Melville as the best of their time is attested to by the ongoing influence of *American Renaissance*.

In this respect, Cain is wrong in abolishing literature as a separate category. Whatever the historian may want to explore, in literary studies Matthiessen's operating principle was the correct one: *in art, it is quality, not equality, that matters*. Aesthetic quality is what all serious students of literature have a right to demand. For these reasons, whatever may be the reigning political orthodoxy at Wellesley or in the academy at large, teachers of literature as an art have an obligation to demote not Hemingway, Hawthorne, and James but writers of marginal quality, whatever their class, race, or gender. Henry James put the matter very well in "The Lesson of Balzac": "Nothing counts, of course, in art, but the excellent; nothing exists, however briefly, for estimation, for appreciation but the superlative. . . ."

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The good-natured pessimist
by Joseph Epstein

As a young man, the Triestine novelist Italo Svevo's favorite author was Schopenhauer. "The whole of Svevo's life shows traces of the deep impression left on his mind by 'the philosopher of pessimism,'" writes John Gatt-Rutter, in his recent, carefully researched, and richly detailed biography of Svevo,[1] "but his application of Schopenhauer was not the usual one." A good thing, too, for it was Schopenhauer who wrote that we must "regard man first and foremost as a being who exists only as a consequence of his culpability and whose life is an expiation of the crime of being born." It was Schopenhauer, again, who set out the bleak terms under which, in his view, we all play the hopeless game of life:

> The vanity of existence is revealed in the whole form existence assumes: in the infiniteness of time and space contrasted with the finiteness of the individual in both; in the fleeting present as the sole form in which actuality exists; in the contingency and relativity of all things; in continual becoming without being; in continual desire without satisfaction; in the continual frustration of striving of which life consists.

Italo Svevo believed all this, but he also believed that embedded in the tragedy of existence there was comedy. Man may be tragic in the long view but in the short view he was more often ridiculous; and this ridiculousness, along with making him comical, made him, in the work of the mature Svevo, sympathetic. This general view makes Svevo himself what the Italians call a *pessimista bonario*, or good-natured pessimist.

Attributing a strong, unitary influence of any thinker on the work of any serious artist is always risky business. Svevo liked to tell the story about Wagner writing to Schopenhauer to inform him how profound an effect the philosopher's thought had on his music, and Schopenhauer replying that the composer whose music seemed best to fit his philosophy was Rossini. Svevo had a true taste for life's contradictions, a positive passion for paradox. "Life leaves no space for illusion," he said, yet in his masterpiece, *Confessions of Zeno*, he has his autobiographically based character Zeno Cosini reflect: "I honestly believe that I have always needed to be in the middle of an adventure, or of some complication that gives the illusion of one." No room for illusions in life, Svevo might say, except who can live without them? Tell Svevo that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, and he would likely have responded that it strikes him there are more than two points out there, he doesn't have a ruler, and besides yesterday he broke his last pencil. Perverse though this general view sounds, it nonetheless had behind it an epistemology, a theory about the nature of

1 *Italo Svevo: A Double Life*, by John Gatt-Rutter; Oxford University Press, 410 pages, $79.

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knowledge. "Truth," the extraordinary fellow who called himself Italo Svevo once wrote in a book review, "is a lady who gives the finger to whoever excitedly runs after her, while she surrenders herself, indeed, imposes herself, on the man who does not seek her."

Svevo's real name was Ettore Schmitz, and behind the pen name of Italo Svevo there is a history and a geography and a psychological condition to consider. Italo Svevo translates to Italus the Swabian, or the Italian-Swabian, after the German district of Swabia. Ettore Schmitz was born in 1861, the fifth of eight children of a Jewish glassware merchant in Trieste. He was brought up speaking Italian while holding Austrian citizenship and having German ancestry. Schmitz later attributed his pen name, which he took up with the publication of his first novel, *A Life* (1892), to his German education, which was a commercial one and not very good. The Trieste in which he lived was populated by a mixture of Italians, Austrians, and Slavs. The city's politics, given its place as a pawn piece in the intricate chess game of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, require a more patient intelligence than mine and a thicker journal than you are now reading to describe adequately: Bosnia-Herzegovina and all that. A city dominated by commerce and finance—Stendhal once claimed that its only religion was money—Trieste was largely indifferent to a dreamy literary man of the type of the youthful Ettore Schmitz.

A dreamy type Schmitz clearly was, and would remain through all his life. What he dreamed about was becoming a famous writer. He dreaded the business career his father had planned for him—a career made all the more necessary when his father, having suffered serious financial setbacks, lost his nerve and hovered near breakdown. Svevo's first serious job out of school was as a clerk in the Trieste branch of a Viennese bank. He alternated between bouts of excruciating boredom and dreams of saving the bank through some fantastical act of financial heroism. "A poet," the Russian proverb has it, "always cheats his boss." A novelist is generally not much better. Schmitz, though, was not yet a novelist, nor did he even aspire to be. He did some reviewing for the local press, he started various plays, most of which he never completed, he daydreamed about playing heroic roles in a world in which he sensed that he was never likely to play more than a bit part. He was, in other words, already well launched on that career of abulia—an acute sense of loss of willpower— that would not only haunt him his life long but provide one of the great subjects for his art.

Loss or lack of will ought not to be confused with laziness, of which Schmitz could never be accused. While laboring away at his dreary tasks at the Unionbank in Trieste, he taught courses at the local Istituto Superiore Commerciale Revoltella, worked part-time on a local newspaper, and read widely in continental philosophy and literature. He served a year's compulsory duty in the Austrian army. (He liked to tell about following an imperious Austrian officer up an escarpment: the officer, turning back, said to him, "See that you don't bite my behind," to which Schmitz responded, "Don't you know Jews don't eat pork?") A full-time job-holder, a part-time litterateur, a man with several interests but no great promise in any one line, he believed himself, not unreasonably, a dilettante, with the instincts of an artist but none of the requisite originality. A man with so strong a feeling for his own limitations slips easily into irony, that mode of speech and writing in which one never quite means what one says or ever quite says what one means.

Svevo's irony is gentle yet pervasive, and not in the least bitter. His is the irony appropriate to a man bemused by the world yet at the same time entertained by his own bemusement. "How astonishing reality was!" says a character in Svevo's second novel, *As A Man Grows Older* (1898). That exclamation, with its perpetual note of surprise, could stand as an epigraph to all that Svevo wrote. His writing has a quality of amused astonishment, as if he wrote

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with both eyebrows raised and a sly smile upon his lips. If the effect seems comical, so do most photographs of Svevo reveal him to have looked. He had a large head, dark languorous eyes, and, it is reported, a deafening laugh. The youthful Svevo resembles an Italianate Charlie Chaplin; later he comes across as Ben Blue wearing Buster Keaton's pancake boater; and finally, in his last years, he could pass for a smaller version of a Keystone Kop. But any resemblance of Italo Svevo to a silent film star is put to rout by his relentless self-analysis and endless loquacity. Asked to explain the twenty-five-year hiatus between his second and third novels and how he was able to abstain from writing for so long, Svevo remarked, "I talked a great deal."

Svevo delighted in the mysteries of human personality, beginning with his own. His novels and stories are filled with such amusing notes of wonderment as his asking why "good talkers never have luck with women," or why "whenever two Italians are at the same table each of them is burning to get away from the other so as not to have to listen to him." But not all is at this level of charming kibitzing. "It is in illness that animals most resemble men," wrote Svevo in his story "Short Sentimental Journey." "It isn't race that makes a Jew," he noted elsewhere, "it's life."

Life's astonishments, one's inability to mold it to one's desires—let us not begin to speak of conquering it—these were things Svevo was well set up to understand from the very beginning. He believed that some people in life were better fitted for living; in some loose Darwinian sense, they were further evolved; they had more energy, were more beautiful or handsome or talented; they were less burdened by a nagging consciousness of life's perils. Svevo knew himself not to be among these lucky ones, gifted of the gods. In *Confessions of Zeno*, the hero reflects: "At that time [on my honeymoon] I was attacked by a slight illness from which I was never to recover. It was a mere trifle; the fear of growing old, and above all the fear of death." Such fears can only conduce to detach one from life, however much one wishes to take an active hand in one's own destiny. They tend, too, to relegate one, as Edouard Roditi once put it in describing Svevo's characters, to "the margins of social and economic activity where, instead of acting, they generally dream, analyze and comment [on] the actions of others or the workings of chance."

Novels with congenitally passive heroes—always acted upon, never propelling themselves into action—are not everybody's idea of a good time. Marinetti, author of the Futurist manifesto, said that in reading Svevo "I got the impression I was eating chocolates. I am a lion and do not eat chocolates." This was in 1930, two years after Svevo's death. The year before Svevo died, a young critic named Guido Piovene, writing in the aftermath of the discovery of Svevo by the modernist cognoscenti in Paris and during the time of Mussolini, took out after him with a rubber truncheon:

> Italo Svevo, a Triestine merchant, author of mediocre novels, viewed among us with the indifference he deserves, finds himself suddenly proclaimed a great writer by a decadent Irish novelist living in Trieste, Joyce; by a decadent poet from Paris, Valéry Larbaud; and by a critic, Benjamin Crémieux, who, because he is competent in matters of French literature, passes in France for a connoisseur of Italian literature, of which he has some notions among people who have none. What are the merits of Svevo? The fact that more than any other Italian he has espoused a passive and analytic treatment which reached its peak with Proust, and which will be considered a decadent art as long as it is held that art must be the work of living and active men, and that a painter is more deserving than a mirror.

With the notable exception of Eugenio Montale, who early recognized his quality, Italians generally tended not to be enamored of Svevo. In Italy his books were put down when they weren't ignored. Benedetto Croce makes no mention of Svevo; Pirandello

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never commented on a play that Svevo once sent him (as Freud never wrote to acknowledge the copy of *Confessions of Zeno* Svevo sent along to him). Svevo's books, rather modest in scope and almost entirely self-reflexive, must have confused an Italian readership heated up by the strenuous grandiosities of D'Annunzio. His books were no doubt an affront to those who believed in the puffed-up caricature of Italian manliness. "We are," Svevo once wrote, "a living protest against that ridiculous conception of the Superman, which has been so much drummed into us (particularly us Italians)." During his lifetime, Svevo was never widely appreciated in Italy; and despite his late-life *succès d'estime* in Paris, literary capital of the world, he had to struggle to get his early novels re-issued in the country of his birth.

Although I have just enough Italian to board the wrong train for Milan out of the rather dreary *stazione* at Bologna, people who really know Italian and its various dialects always remark on Svevo's language, which did not in the least aid his reputation with the Italian critics of his day. Sometimes termed "Triestine merchant's Esperanto," this language fell far short of what then was thought "good Italian." As Svevo himself wrote to the editor of the Italian journal *La Voce*, "Perhaps it is obvious that I have written only one novel in my whole life. All the less pardonable that I always wrote it badly." At other times, Svevo defended his language as the only one that was alive and natural to him, arguing that to have attempted to avail himself of the floridities of literary Italian would have resulted in dismal artificiality. In English translation, Svevo reads well and sounds altogether modern. François Bondy, writing in *The Hudson Review* more than twenty years ago, noted: "Today, the 'incorrect' style of Svevo passes for a model of writing. It has loosened the tongue of a whole new Italian literature—I am thinking of Pavese, of Vittorini, and even of Silone—which unmasks rhetoric and has only an ironic relationship to the great sonorous flights." The lesson here to young and old is clear enough: one may write as "poorly" as one likes, so long as one has genius.

A genius, even a modest one, is the last thing Svevo ever felt himself. Never having been taken quite seriously as a writer by anyone else, he had scarcely anything but doubts about his own writing. He had to contribute to the cost of publication of all three of his novels, the first two of which created barely a ripple. His wife, as Professor Gatt-Rutter remarks in his biography, "tolerated his literary and philosophical interests as a more or less harmless and rather superior pastime." Svevo himself alternated between feeling lashed to his writing—"the only business in which I can take pleasure," he called it—and treating it as if it were a vice he had to break himself of, like his endless smoking.

In nearly all photographs of him, Svevo has a cigarette going. His diary makes frequent mention of yet another of his resolutions to quit smoking; he was always in search of the perfect day on which to do it. "I'm smoking like a mobilized Turk," he once wrote to his wife while travelling on business, "and so I cough busily away, especially in the morning." Colleagues recall him characteristically smoking and joking. He quit almost daily but never truly stopped. Near the end of his life he was smoking thirty or forty cigarettes a day. P. N. Furbank, in his 1966 study of Svevo,[2] recounts how, on his deathbed, Svevo, seeing his physician-nephew Aurelio light up a cigarette, asked for one himself. When refused, he is said to have murmured, "That really would have been the last cigarette."

What a splendid vice smoking is for a Schopenhauerian! Few habits teach us so much about the place of will—and especially will-lessness—in life; few make a greater comedy of human resolution. Few things, too, give more pleasure than contemplating ceasing to smoke, so long as a freshly lit cigarette is in one's hand, a wreath of blue

2 *Italo Svevo: The Man and the Writer*, by P. N. Furbank; University of California Press.

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smoke gathering about one's head. Svevo understood all this perfectly, but his was an understanding that passeth all resolution. As he wrote in "The Last Cigarette," the opening section of *Confessions of Zeno*:

> In order to make it seem a little less foolish I tried to give a philosophical content to the malady of "the last cigarette." You strike a noble attitude, and say: "Never again!" But what becomes of the attitude if you keep your word? You can only preserve it if you keep on renewing your resolution.

Svevo also understood the link between smoking and dreaming. Professor Gatt-Rutter quotes from an early essay of Svevo's entitled "Il fumo":

> The smoker is first and foremost a dreamer . . . . The dreamer is never consistent because dream carries you far away and not in a straight line . . . . The true dreamer . . . always leads a double life and both his lives are equal in intensity . . . . Thus his inspiration has two sources: pure observation and dream, dream which is distorted by corrupted nerves.

Smoking aids dreaminess, and his habit of dreaming, Svevo once averred, "is really what gives me my almost continual serenity"—not excluding his dream of one day successfully quitting cigarettes.

As for the double life of the dreamer, all of us, I believe, at least partially lead that, divided in our thought between the lives we lead and the lives we might sometimes wish we led. In Svevo's case, this sense of a double life was intensified with his marriage to Livia Veneziani, daughter of a successful paint manufacturer in Trieste. She was his cousin and thirteen years younger than he, who was thirty-five when he married. She was a good wife and mother—they had one child, a daughter Letizia—though apparently little interested in her husband's interior life. Owing to this marriage, Svevo eventually went into the family business, whose specialty was producing paint that wore especially well on the hulls of ships; he agreed to have himself baptized a Catholic—though he continued to think of himself as an atheistic Jew—and told himself that he had put aside his hope for literary glory.

Although through the paint business Ettore Schmitz would become a reasonably wealthy man, the notion of his having knuckled under, or sold out, or otherwise betrayed his art doesn't, in my view, really come into play. Had his first two novels met a kindlier fate, earning him some measure of money or distinction, perhaps he would have tried to work full-time at literature. But life, plainly, had other things in store. "Midway through life's journey," wrote Svevo in an essay entitled "Optimism and Pessimism," "we shut our eyes in slumber to shattered delusions, forgotten desires, renunciations forced upon us by the imperious claims of our milieu, of people, of time." Suffering, we know, is not absolutely compulsory in life, for the wicked and the silly sometimes flourish like crabgrass, but Svevo could never have become the writer he was to become had his way been made smooth.

You can't, after all, be a pessimist and expect perfect justice, too. Nor can you hope to write Svevian novels after a lifetime of sunny-skied, rosy-cheeked success—going, as the Victorians were wont to say, from strength to strength. Svevo, like most of the characters in his fiction, went instead from doubt to doubt. These characters are for the vast most part autobiographical, if not in minute detail then in general spirit. The Svevo fictional hero tends to be a secondary character, a sideline figure, nobody's main man. One might call him a failure except that he is never really in serious contention for success. Had Italo Svevo written *Hamlet*, it might today be called *Yorick*.

Un inetto ("A Failure") was Svevo's original title for his first novel, which was published in 1892, when he was thirty-one years old, under the publisher's suggested title of *Una vita*, or *A Life*. It is the story of a young man come from the provinces to an unnamed city (obviously Trieste), there to fail miserably. It is an old story, a Stendhalian and Balzacian story, except that Svevo's

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young hero, Alfonso Nitti—no Julien Sorel or Lucien Chardon—could scarcely be accused of giving it his best shot. Alfonso is a dreamer, as every seriously ambitious young man tends to be, but his dreams give him perhaps too much pleasure. "He himself when he felt at his most wretched," Svevo writes, "took refuge in unrealizable dreams." And even when Alfonso's dreams come true—as they do in one key incident in the novel—the reality proves more than he can handle. The crucial difference between the normal person who has his dreams and the case-hardened dreamer is that the latter really prefers not to be wakened.

Alfonso Nitti works in a bank—as did the young Ettore Schmitz—where his principal task is to copy out documents. The excruciating dullness of the work gives him ample room to slip away into his various fantasies, which include: doing something heroic to aid the bank in crisis and thus be recognized for the brilliant and resourceful young man he is; achieving literary glory for an original philosophical book he is at work on in his hours away from the bank; and conquering the love of Annetta Maller, the rather haughty daughter of the owner of the bank where he serves as an obscure clerk. Svevo is impressively efficient on the fantasy of his young hero's book, on which Alfonso is said to "work well but very little," so that after months all his efforts come to "three or four short pages of preface, which promised to do and attempt much while nothing was actually done or attempted at all." Such paucity of production was "equivalent to a tacit renunciation of all ambition." But then Svevo also tells us that "anything at all doubtful eventually became important for Alfonso."

A Life is one of those novels in which not much happens, but very slowly. The dreariness of Alfonso's work in the bank is set out in exhaustive detail; his not much jollier life at the Lanuccis, the lower-middle-class family with whom he boards and is viewed as a potential husband for their hopeless daughter, is firmly established in all its grayness. Between the pillar of boredom and the post of despair, Alfonso lives his negligible days, refreshed chiefly by the imaginary breezes provided by his fantasies of literary, commercial, and romantic conquest. All his relationships are superficial; and, within, inertia struggles (not, to be sure, very fiercely) with doubt for his soul. The heavy aroma of failure, with a faint hint of oregano, hangs over all.

The central event in *A Life* is Alfonso's seduction of Annetta, a dilettante with literary aspirations. He spends much time collaborating with her on a novel of apparently boundless vacuity. The seduction has only to be effected for Alfonso to lose interest, feel restless and disgusted. When it is time for him to solidify his gains by turning his conquest into marriage, thus lifting himself up from his current obscurity, he leaves town to return to his village, where he discovers his mother is dying. Told he must return immediately or lose Annetta, he naturally delays. Annetta decides to marry someone else. When he does eventually return, he learns that he is to be demoted at the bank. Worse, Annetta's brother challenges him to a duel. It is all really too much for Alfonso, who determines to commit suicide—"never in his daydreamer's life had he been so completely possessed by a dream." In a somewhat muddled Schopenhauerian abnegation of will, he turns on the gas and has done with it.

One of the advantages in having written a masterpiece is that one's earlier works are re-examined in the search for premonitions of what is to come. Late in life Svevo wrote to a French critic that if, as James Joyce and others had said, every writer really has only one book in him, with all books that follow being essentially embellishments and twists and turns on that one book, his, Svevo's, one book would be *A Life*. "Except," he added, "that it is written so badly (far worse than the other two) that I ought to rewrite it." Certainly *A Life* is the dimmest of Svevo's novels. In it his comic powers are still only incipient. *A Life* owes its own life, insofar as the life of a book is measured in the interest it can command, to the novels that will follow.

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These did not come quickly. Svevo did not begin his second novel, *As A Man Grows Older* (*Senilità* in Italian), until fully four years later, in 1896, the year, in fact, of his marriage. Two years after that, when this second novel was published, it received, Professor Gatt-Rutter informs us, six for the most part rather niggling reviews, the most depressing of which had to have been the following single-sentence slap in a Milanese socialist newspaper: "Italo Svevo's analytical novel of passion, which indulges in the details of the psychology of love, would gain from greater attention to form and from reducing its largesse of striking phrases." Svevo was thirty-seven, a married man, the father of a two-year-old daughter. Enough of literary games. He accepted his mother-in-law's invitation to join the Veneziani family underwater paint business.

Svevo later claimed, in an autobiographical essay, that he tried to give up writing, but, nothing if not a slave to habit, he found it no more easy to stop writing than to stop smoking. Even so, however half-heartedly he may have entered the paint business, he worked at it full-time. He divided his work day, which began at seven in the morning, between the Veneziani factory and office. He was vouchsafed the family's secret paint formula and supervised the brewing of paint. He was in charge of the factory work force, and was apparently, according to Professor Gatt-Rutter, very good at dealing with the workers. He handled, in fact, every aspect of the business, and at one point was sent to England to open a new factory. Meanwhile, he lived with the habits and among the full trappings of the typical bourgeois: a good cigar and a comfortable armchair at home after lunch, theater- or opera-going in the evening; he was the dutiful father, the loving husband. When a critic named Ida Finzi at one point asked about his writing, Svevo replied, "Oh, I'm deep in underwater paint." But the writer within him was not so easily drowned.

Still, the dreary reception accorded *As A Man Grows Older* (the novel was given its English title by James Joyce) must have stung. After it Svevo wrote, "In this world one is compelled to write but not to publish." There is nothing callow about Svevo's second novel, which is a remarkable book and the work of a mature artist. Like *A Life*, *As A Man Grows Older* is about the fantasies of the weak, but it adds to these high-minded self-justification and cunning self-deception, so that the fantasies take on a complex life of their own and a richer interest all round. "No fool like an old fool" is an often-enough repeated maxim, yet Emilio Brentani, the hero of *As A Man Grows Older*, is only thirty-five, which only goes to show that, in this amazing world, there is precocity even in foolishness.

Brentani is a writer who has published a single, now nearly forgotten, novel and who holds a subordinate post in an insurance society the salary from which supports him and his younger, though already old-maid, sister. He has ceased to write out of inertia, but this does not prevent him from continuing to take himself as an artist. His ample self-esteem is crucial to his (from the outset) fraudulent relationship with Angiolina, a daughter of the lower working class, "a tall, healthy blonde, with big blue eyes and a supple graceful body, an expressive face and transparent skin glowing with health." Angiolina is a young woman with a vast enthusiasm for life and its simple rewards and also a woman with a certain reputation—she is, not to put too fine a point on it, an amiable and faithless slut. All Brentani has in mind is to have a brief fling with her. But being an intellectual, whose experience comes chiefly from books and who has little appetite for facing facts in life, he is able to make himself miserable in no time at all. But then any man who wishes to educate a woman, as Brentani does Angiolina, is in for a grim education of his own. In a nice reversal of the legendary King Pygmalion, Brentani really wishes to turn a live woman into a statue.

As A Man Grows Older is a novel about a state of mind. When Svevo entitled it *Senilità* he had in his own mind the notion of creating a character of spiritual if not phys-

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ical senility, someone who lives passively and in confusion, wandering about without a firm hold on reality. As Beno Weiss puts it in his recent volume on Svevo,[3] "Unlike Alfonso [in *A Life*], Emilio's conflict is no longer with society or with his work, but rather with his own personality and the dual reality of his life, being and appearance." In his second novel, Svevo is a much more confident writer than he was in his first novel, more penetrating psychologically, richer and denser and defter with detail, a serious craftsman, an artist.

Emilio Brentani is a man who filters all experience through his sensibility. This means that he imposes his often parboiled ideas on such reality as he encounters. He is blind to obvious truths that do not immediately affect him, such as, for example, the hopeless dreariness of his sister's life. He turns the lives of others into material that will comport well with his own fantasies. He is always making Angiolina into something she is not, teaching her things that simply aren't so. Emilio is vaguely a socialist, or at least, as Svevo writes, "in the past he had indulged in socialistic ideas, of course without ever stirring a finger to realize them." When he explains his dream of a socialist future to Angiolina, telling her that a time will come when capital will be abolished, working conditions improved, and woman "the equal of man and love a mutual gift," she replies: "If everything was to be divided there wouldn't be much left for anybody. The working-classes are jealous good-for-nothings and will never succeed, however much you do for them." But nothing finally stops Emilio in his determination to shape Angiolina into the stuff his dreams are made of. Years later, long after Angiolina has run off with an embezzling bank clerk, Emilio somehow conflates his memories of her with those of his sister who has died of a broken heart, so that "she stood for all that was noble in his thought and vision during that period of his life." The astonishments of reality are simply unavailable to Emilio Brentani, who, despite his elevated view of himself as a cultivated gent, is merely another of the vast majority who cannot stand too much reality.

After the general incomprehension and disdain that greeted *As A Man Grows Older,* the public literary ambitions of Ettore Schmitz, as we now must once again think of Svevo, died. Privately, though, the flame never went out. Sometimes he gave way to despondency; sometimes he chastised himself for being unable to think without a pen in his hand—that is, for not being more of a man of action. Writing to his wife, he complained about "the violence I did myself in making such a clean leap into this new line of business," then added: "Inside my brain there must be a cog that won't stop churning out those novels that no one would read, and rebels and goes on spinning crazily whether you're there or not." When his wife at one point asked that he destroy her letters to him, he shot back: "Why are you so scared that *other people* might read your writings! I who have published novels know that *other people* are extremely discreet." He took up the violin, which he played passionately but apparently not well (he had difficulty with tempo), and played—naturally—second fiddle in an amateur string quartet. He was becoming a wealthy man; the entire British navy was gray with Veneziani paint, thanks to a surprisingly easy deal that, Professor Gatt-Rutter reports, Schmitz himself negotiated. As late as 1912, he announced that he had given up his pen name of Italo Svevo and any further hope of "a little proud literary fame," but he continued to read modern literature and could not stop the ideas for plays, stories, and essays that swirled in his mind.

In 1905 there arrived in Trieste a slender, ill-sighted Irishman with an ego as big as the Ritz and a revolutionary literary talent to match whose name was James Joyce. Joyce had not yet published any of the books that would make him famous, but he already carried himself as if he had. He had come to

3 *Italo Svevo*, by Beno Weiss; Twayne, 170 pages, $24.95.

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Trieste with his family to teach English at the Berlitz School there, which he did until he was released because the school was overstaffed. After a spell in Rome, a city that he hated, Joyce returned to Trieste, earning his living by, among other jobs, giving English lessons privately. Schmitz needed English to facilitate his running the Veneziani factory in England, and hired Joyce to teach him and his wife—he was to call Joyce *il mercante di gerundi*, the purveyor of gerunds. Thus began one of the rare sweet symbiotic relationships in modern literature.

Schmitz was twenty years older than Joyce—they were, respectively, forty-five and twenty-five when they first met—but the younger man, despite his largely unsettled condition in life, was much the more confident. During one of the thrice-weekly lessons that Joyce provided for Schmitz and his wife, he brought along and read his recently completed story "The Dead." Schmitz's wife was so moved by it that she repaired to the garden of their villa to gather a bouquet to present to Joyce in honor of his story. Schmitz meanwhile was moved to tell Joyce that he, too, had once written, having years before published two novels to resounding silence. Joyce took copies of these novels home with him that evening. At his next lesson, as Richard Ellmann recounts in his biography of James Joyce, Joyce told Schmitz: "Do you know that you are a neglected writer? There are passages in *Senilità* that even Anatole France could not have improved." Joyce then quoted a few, from memory. Schmitz was stunned, delighted, exhilarated. Joyce's opinion enabled him to take himself seriously again as a writer in a way he had not allowed himself to do for years. Later, Joyce's intervention was crucial to the success of *Confessions of Zeno*.

What did Joyce get from Schmitz? First, the thing that Joyce seemed to ask from all friends and acquaintances: money. Schmitz lent Joyce money in Trieste and he later sent him money in Ireland. Joyce often applied to Schmitz for aid, and once he left his dog Fido in Schmitz's family's care. Schmitz sent business clients Joyce's way for English lessons, and his father-in-law briefly hired Joyce as a correspondence clerk in 1914. Joyce pumped Schmitz for information about the Jews, which he used in the composition of his character Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*. Although Schmitz was not the precise model for Bloom, Richard Ellmann claims that he was "almost certainly" the prototype. Joyce also borrowed Schmitz's wife Livia's name, and her long, reddish-blonde hair, for Anna Livia Plurabelle in *Finnegans Wake*. P. N. Furbank quotes Joyce's letter to Schmitz on this point: "Reassure your wife with regard to Anna Livia. I have taken no more than her hair from her and even that only on loan, to adorn the rivulet which runs through my city, the Anna Liffey." Joyce and Schmitz were never intimate friends—intimacy was not Joyce's specialty—but each man, the prudish bohemian and the exuberant bourgeois, liked and amused the other. Furbank tells the story about Schmitz once telling an off-color joke to Joyce, who reproved him for having done so, remarking that "I never say that sort of thing, though I write it." Schmitz's comment on this was, "It would appear then that his works are not ones that could be read in his own presence."

Writing to his wife from England, Schmitz once noted: "A beaten footballer still has his self-respect; a failed writer is merely ridiculous." Nevertheless, fight against it though he did, the appetite for literary glory rose up in him once more, and by 1919 he had set to work on *Confessions of Zeno*. Naomi Lebowitz, who wrote with balance and penetration on Svevo in her 1978 study of the writer,[4] remarks that there are three specific events that "help us to chart the motivating influences behind Svevo's third novel: the meeting with James Joyce, the reading of Freud, and the sequestered leisure imposed upon him by the war." Of the three, perhaps the event that best explains the leap from the grayness of *A Life*

4 *Italo Svevo*, by Naomi Lebowitz; Rutgers University Press.

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and the deep brown of *As A Man Grows Older* to the rich and brightly colored palette of *Confessions of Zeno* is the author's encounter with the writings of Sigmund Freud.

Schmitz's first encounter with the doctrines of psychoanalysis came through a friend of his brother-in-law's, a Triestine psychoanalyst named Edoardo Weiss. Weiss sent this brother-in-law, who sought a cure for his homosexuality, to Victor Trausk, an early member of Freud's Vienna circle. (No cure was effected.) In 1911, Professor Gatt-Rutter reports, Schmitz himself met another member of the Freudian circle, Wilhelm Stekel, while he was on holiday in Bad Ischl. In his book, Beno Weiss sets the date when Schmitz began reading Freud seriously at 1916. In 1918, it is known, he began to work, in collaboration with his physician-nephew, on a translation into Italian of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. How much of Freud Schmitz read is not known. What is certain is that he took to Freud like a fat boy to a candy store.

Little wonder, for Ettore Schmitz was a Freudian delight, a walking laboratory of hesitations, symptoms, odd tics. On his own, he could have kept three couches busy. He suffered persistent needless jealousy, hypochondria, melancholia, you name it. Nor did he wish to be fully engaged by life, as this entry from the diary that he kept for his wife before their marriage shows:

> My indifference towards life is still there: even when I'm by your side enjoying myself, there is something inside me that isn't sharing my enjoyment and that says to me: "Watch out, it's not as you think it is, it's all a comedy, the curtain will come down in the end." Besides, indifference towards life is the essence of my intellectual life. Whatever's worth-while in my own talk comes from irony, and I'm afraid lest the very day you managed to make me believe in life (but you never will) I should find myself diminished by doing so. I'd almost beg you—almost—to leave me as I am. I have a great fear of happiness making me stupid.

A man who cultivates indifference and detachment, who prefers to filter life through the fine mesh of irony, who daydreams unduly, who feels preternaturally old and has had a vivid presentiment of his death from his earliest days, who can't (never really could) enter fully into the steam of life, yes, Doctor, the pieces begin to sort themselves out, a syndrome emerges, our patient has what looks suspiciously like the disease of being a modern writer. In Schmitz's case, the disease was intensified by his doing very little writing. A quarter of a century elapsed between *As A Man Grows Older* and *Confessions of Zeno*, which was completed in 1922 and published in 1923. Italo Svevo, as he now once again became, was sixty-one when he finished the novel, and with the passing of years had acquired an increased amusement, tolerance, and heightened recognition of the rather comic helplessness against which most of us struggle when faced with life. If Svevo suffered from the disease of being a modern writer, there is in his final novel an absence of alienation, depression, and defeat, and an impressive aura of comedy, ebullience, and endlessly fascinating complexity. *Confessions of Zeno* is one of those rare modern novels that make one happy.

Yet the novel has often been described, mistakenly in my view, as a psychoanalytic novel. Beno Weiss, for example, writes that *Confessions of Zeno* "is the first Italian psychoanalytic novel," and in his criticism of the novel he expends great energy fitting its plot and characters to Freudian schema (". . . when we try to identify the etiology of Zeno's illness, we must go beyond the oedipal question since everything seems to revolve around the father figure [yawn] . . ."). It seems to me that while the sources of Svevo's novel are psychoanalytic—the novel is written in the form of a diary written for Zeno Cosini's psychoanalyst—the intention of the novel is, among other things, to mock psychoanalysis, with its confident labeling, its lockstep determinacy, its seemingly comprehensive explanations for all human behavior. "We novelists," Svevo wrote about Freudianism, "are wont

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to play with great philosophies and are certainly not fitted to clarify them: we falsify them but we humanize them." In the novel, Zeno remarks upon his psychoanalyst's solemn comments: "I prefer laughing about these asininities to discussing them." And when the psychoanalyst, discovering that Zeno wishes to make love to two different beautiful women, asks himself why would a man wish to do such a thing, Zeno thinks, "Who but he could have invented questions like that?" Or, as Svevo put it to an admirer who was considering undergoing psychoanalysis, "Freud was a great man, but more for us novelists than for the ill."

Italo Svevo's acquaintance with Freud's writing stimulated him not so much to submit to Freud's ideas but to test their truth through counterposing his own ideas in the only way that novelists legitimately can—through the intricate dialectic of narrative. In Svevo's case, the confrontation between novelist and thinker is more direct than it generally is, owing to the psychoanalytic setting of *Confessions of Zeno*. The novel is divided into six main sections: on Zeno's smoking problem, on his complicated relationship with his father, on his proposal to his wife, on his marriage and his mistress, on his business partnership with his brother-in-law, and finally on his observations about his own psychoanalysis. Each section is free-wheeling, highlighting the paradoxical elements in life—Zeno's wife, for example, isn't his first or even his second choice, yet she turns out to be the perfect mate—and the whole is obliquely comical.

From the start we know that a game is being played when the novel begins with a preface written by the analyst who was working with Zeno Cosini and who blames him for having "suddenly thrown up his cure just at the most interesting point, thus cheating me of the fruits of my long and patient analysis of these memoirs." The name Zeno, too, is a giveaway, for the two famous Zenos in classical history are Zeno of Elea (born circa 490 B.C.), inventor of the dialectic and of Zeno's paradox, and Zeno of Citium (335-263 B.C.), founder of the Stoic school of philosophy. Zeno Cosini, a fifty-six-year-old Triestine businessman, husband and father and bourgeois par excellence, will pose paradox and stoicism against the mighty engine of psychoanalytic doctrine. It doesn't sound at all like a fair fight but for Cosini's (really Svevo's) secret weapon—a devastating sense of humor.

In one of its aspects *Confessions of Zeno* is a comedy about human resolution—"delicious resolutions," as Zeno Cosini at one point calls them. Zeno is always resolving to quit smoking, to leave his mistress, to treat his brother-in-law fairly, to gain control over his business, to cease being the nearly negligible character whom no one—scarcely even himself—can take quite seriously. He expends vast energy making an abundance of resolutions, which leave him rather exhausted. "If you use up all your energy in making resolutions you have no time for anything else," he writes, "for it takes a Julius Caesar to be able to do two things at once." At one point in his early manhood, Zeno wrote out in advance on the walls of his bedroom the dates on which he planned to quit cigarettes, but he changed these dates so often that he eventually ran out of wall space and had to move. But this is sick, you might suggest. "Perhaps so," Zeno would doubtless reply, "perhaps so," and then ask to borrow a cigarette from you.

"Sickness is a conviction," Zeno notes early in the novel, "and I was born with that conviction." Zeno admires the healthy, and one of the great divisions among characters in all Svevo's novels is that between those who are naturally healthy and those who are otherwise. Admirable, fortunate, happy though the healthy may be, there are drawbacks, in Zeno's view, even to their condition: "Health cannot analyze itself even if it looks at itself in the glass," Zeno writes. "It is only we invalids who can know anything about ourselves." Svevo himself suffered many a *maladie imaginaire*, and he awarded some pips in this line to Zeno: a limp, a stabbing pain in the side, and so tender a conscience that "I was always trying by my present behavior to diminish the

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remorse I must feel in the future." (Svevo joins Kafka and Proust in being among the great hypochondriacs of modern literature, though it is well to remember—à la Delmore Schwartz's famous remark about even paranoids having real enemies—that even hypochondriacs have real illnesses, for both Kafka and Proust died young.) It will be one of the conclusions of this rich novel that, within limits, sickness may be underrated—may even be indivisible from one's own special power.

An amusing moment occurs roughly halfway through *Confessions of Zeno*, when Zeno Cosini, departing the apartment of his working-class mistress, with whom he has just made physical love for the first time, reports:

> As I hurried home, I was even bold enough to begin attacking our social system, as if that were responsible for my shortcomings. I thought it ought to be so arranged as to allow one to have intercourse occasionally with other women without having to fear the consequences. Even with women one could never love.

Zeno goes on to make plain that man's weakness has nothing to do with any social system, nor can it be remedied by psychological cure. "Therefore," he continues, "I don't think that remorse springs from regret for having done something wrong, but rather from a recognition of one's own sinful nature. The higher part of one's body bends down to observe and judge the lower, and finds it monstrous." At the same time, the paradox-loving Zeno reports that this love affair has been very good for his marriage. It has made him appreciate his wife all the more, made him all the more affectionate to her, which has in turn made her all the more loving toward him. "I had not," Zeno concludes, "felt so innocent for a long time."

Svevo is skeptical not only of criticisms of the social system and of elaborate intellectual systems but even of writing itself. In a lovely letter to his then ten-year-old daughter (the letter is quoted in full by P. N. Furbank), who was evincing an interest in writing poetry, the novelist tells her about two different men, one who makes beautiful wardrobe cabinets and the other whose job it is to describe beautiful wardrobe cabinets. "And so they went on," Svevo writes, "the one making wardrobes and the other describing them." Then, later in the letter, after recounting how the describer of wardrobes continually adds little flourishes and touches that change the nature of what he is describing, he adds: "I am sure you can see what a stupid creature that describer of live wardrobes was. But it wasn't really his fault, you know. If you go on describing, day in and day out, you are bound to end up describing all wrong." This was written before Svevo had regained his confidence in his own writing, but nonetheless, as any describer of wardrobes has in his heart to concede, there is much truth to it.

Toward the close of *Confessions of Zeno*, Dr. S., Zeno's psychoanalyst, informs him that he has been suffering from an Oedipal conflict, of which, while he may not yet realize it, he is now cured, though more work by way of re-education is needed. Zeno receives this information with nonchalant incredulity, believing neither in the Oedipal conflict nor in its cure. What he does believe is that even disease brings its own odd kind of strength. Besides, as he notes on the novel's penultimate page, "Life is a little like disease, with its crises and periods of quiescence, its daily improvements and setbacks. But unlike other diseases life is always mortal. It admits of no cure . . . . We need something more than psychoanalysis to help us." This ought to make for a dark ending, but, somehow, it doesn't.

Although Svevo must have known that in *Confessions of Zeno* he had written an extraordinary book, for a time it appeared that he would have to stand by and watch it, too, sink without trace. Reviews in the Italian press treated it as negligible; the *Corriere della Sera* in Milan summarized the book as "a somewhat ramshackle and fragmentary novel, perhaps over-prolix, but not without

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psychological interest." The year before the publication of *Confessions of Zeno*, in 1922, James Joyce had published *Ulysses* and was already well on his way to becoming a heroic figure in modern literature. As Professor Gatt-Rutter puts it, "At last Joyce was in a position to help [Svevo]."

Svevo had sent Joyce a copy of his novel. Joyce wrote back to say that the novel gave him great pleasure and instructed him to send copies to T. S. Eliot, Ford Madox Ford, Gilbert Seldes, and two French writers with a special interest in Italian literature named Valéry Larbaud and Bernard Crémieux. It was Larbaud and Crémieux who were to prove the making of Svevo by devoting a special issue of the magazine *Le Navire d'Argent* to Svevo and his novel. Meanwhile, in Italy, a future Nobel prizewinner, Eugenio Montale, wrote an introductory essay in praise of Svevo for a little magazine. Now, at last, in his middle sixties, a decent modicum of fame was to come Svevo's way. Professor Gatt-Rutter measures the extent of this fame with precision: "Svevo was not to win a wide readership success until long after his death, either in Italy or abroad, but the *succès d'estime* which he won in 1926 took his books (as soon as they became available) straight into the European literary consciousness."

Having waited so long for literary glory, Svevo, when it arrived, lapped it up with uncomplicated pleasure. Giani Stuparich, a writer from Svevo's circle of friends in Trieste, wrote that "perhaps there really never was a writer who so reveled in fame and remained so uncorrupted and untroubled by it." At a PEN Club dinner given in his honor in Paris—other honorands included Ilya Ehrenburg and Isaac Babel—Ehrenburg remembers Svevo smoking one cigarette after another. "Then I remembered *Zeno*," he writes, "and smiled involuntarily." Svevo was all for receiving more praise and was full of literary ambition. He turned out some remarkable stories and began the uncompleted book that bears the English title of *Further Confessions of Zeno*; he had a play produced in Rome. When he was travelling under the name Schmitz, he was asked by a stranger, who had learned that he was from Trieste, whether he had ever met the writer Italo Svevo. After a lifetime of writing in obscurity, this was strong stuff.

An automobile accident, alas, put an end to it all. Driving from Borimo to return to Trieste, the car the family was driving in swerved in the rain into a tree. Svevo appeared only to have injured his leg, but he had suffered from high blood pressure and the accident provided a shock from which his heart never recovered. He was sixty-seven. Doubtless he should have preferred to hold the dice much longer, but at least he died after receiving some literary fame and with his powers undiminished, and there are worse times to depart.

In later years, Svevo's reputation as a writer was always a bit muzzy, and he was talked about as, variously, the Italian Kafka, or the Italian Proust, or the Italian Thomas Mann. He was, finally, the Italian Svevo. As a fellow Triestine, who knew Svevo for decades, wrote to Eugenio Montale, who had written an homage to Svevo after his death, there was a danger of over-interpreting him and turning his life into a legend. "All he had was genius," wrote the man, "no more." This genius, in the event, has proved sufficient to make Italo Svevo a writer of compelling interest today, more than sixty years after his death.

Behind Italo Svevo's genius was his refusal to accept clichés, lofty abstractions, literary and pseudo-scientific constructs—in short, all the standard explanations—as solutions to the profound puzzle that is life. There is something heroic, inspiring even, about a writer who, without reducing life's complexity or denying its terrors, never loses his delight in it. Italo Svevo, the good-natured pessimist and admirer of Schopenhauer, was such a writer. Simply because life is impossible, his writing implies, is no reason not to enjoy it. The good-natured pessimist laughs in the dark, and we, laughing with him, feel, however fleetingly, that we can glimpse the light.

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Are our museums adrift?

by James N. Wood

Is there a crisis in American museums today? Has the remarkable surge in museum building programs left us with a sprawl of chronically indebted institutions, each one condemned to an eternity of fundraising? Will commercial pressures—from both within and without—undermine the scholarly efforts of museums? Have these institutions become so large as to be ungovernable?

A report last year in *The New York Times* noted that there were then vacancies at the top of eighteen American art museums. The exact numbers have undoubtedly changed since then, but the situation remains essentially the same. One might almost imagine those museum directors who are still in their jobs to be like the survivors on Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*—ragged, desperate, nourished in ways one shouldn't examine closely, reaching with their last strength to hail that figure of hope on the horizon, a high-minded and disinterested trustee.

From my experience, the drama of the situation is less simple than it is often portrayed to be. If there is in fact a crisis in the museum profession, it is more complex a matter than the problem of managing ever larger institutions, or the shortage of MBAs among museum directors. Those problems, in the end, are mundane. Granted, the job of running an art museum is bigger now than it ever has been. But the real difficulty is that the job itself has become less clearly defined in people's minds, whether those people are the directors themselves, the board of trustees, or the public at large. The central problem is a lack of clear purpose.

What should be the role of the art museum in our society? Until relatively recently there was considerable consensus as to the purpose of these institutions, what they were supposed to do, why they were doing it, who the audience was. Today that consensus has been badly eroded and we are faced with a confusing array of identities and demands as complex and contradictory as the façades of the past decade's new museum buildings.

I have heard it suggested that today the goal of the museum must be survival, pure and simple, that our primary function is to preserve what is already in our care. Certainly museums exist to conserve the achievements of the past, and in that sense one might say that the survival of the object would be our first priority and our last line of defense. But if we came to the point where we would do anything to guarantee survival—and this, ironically, can entail reckless and unplanned growth—then the battle would clearly be already lost. The private and public financial support that has been responsible for assuring that the art museum was at the very center of America's civic life was not motivated by pleas from a raft of survivors. It was born of the conviction that improvement of the public taste was a responsibility of both democratic government and private wealth, a conviction

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grounded in pragmatism and personal and national self-interest as much as in idealism. What is needed is not just survival but direction, not just crisis management but leadership. It is little accomplishment that you've stayed afloat if you're sailing in a circle.

A narcissistic culture tends to define the museum's purpose as pleasure for the individual and to evaluate its programs in terms of their entertainment value. This is a radical change from our past, for American museums are historically civic institutions—curious hybrids privately supported but explicitly intended for the public. Why do we have museums as the centerpieces of our cities? The older buildings, often classical in design, appear to have been built to symbolize cultural values that the community had in common. If those shared cultural values did indeed exist, can these same cultural values be aspired to today? Should they be? In short, what is the civic purpose of an art museum today?

A frequent response is that museums are economic assets to their communities and a major source of tourism revenue. And so they are. But this fact by itself hardly constitutes a civic purpose. We rightly expect an art museum to be different from a sports franchise and to justify itself by the values it upholds and the way it improves the quality of life in the community.

One must also consider the degree to which art museums express the power of the community and specifically of those individuals who have been able to acquire significant collections of art and then give them to the public. Recently there has been much discussion on the ways in which collectors might alter the museum's mission in their desire to validate their newly purchased holdings of contemporary art. While important seventeenth-century paintings, to cite only one field, can still be acquired for less money than the work of an unproven thirty-year-old, collecting and the publicity surrounding major sales and exhibitions are increasingly focused on recent art. The collector of contemporary art—and frequently the curator in this field as well—crave the validation of the past to confirm their judgment of the present.

The museum as the guardian of a historical consensus is under constant pressure to canonize choices that are, at best, inspired acts of criticism. Nevertheless, contemporary art is increasingly the field in which more museums must participate. Not only because it is where the vast majority of today's collections are being amassed but because here there is both a recognition of the museum's authority and a constant demand for that authority to be exercised. As a result, the future directors of most museums will be ill-equipped without a knowledge of and interest in twentieth-century art, for not to participate in this arena will severely limit a museum's ability to exercise its aesthetic leadership. At the same time, to validate contemporary works that are unworthy will compromise its critical standards and undermine its institutional authority.

If the museum cannot defend its ability and right to exercise aesthetic authority, then its acts of discrimination will be perceived, and very possibly correctly, as discrimination in the invidious sense of the term. Today the director must respond to pressure on the institution's authority coming simultaneously from two opposite directions: above, from academia and the revisionist intellectual methods that are central to much recent scholarship, and below, from the political pressure for the ever expanding entitlement of diverse cultural and socio-economic groups. Both forces put growing pressure on the museum's claim to aesthetic authority; both are essential developments of our diverse and democratic society; and both must be recognized and responded to if the museum is to retain its credibility. Only by clarifying its purpose and demonstrating the essential role it serves can the museum strengthen its authority. A culture that has abdicated the responsibility of defining its values cannot defend the concept of a masterpiece, and a

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museum in such a society would be little more than a vast repository of material culture.

To drift is to abandon the helm to the tides and currents of the open sea. The purpose by which we can set a course has not changed much over the brief history of the American museum. Today, as in the past, our first responsibility is to demand aesthetic values from a culture that would more often than not prefer to avoid the question and judge itself by more materialist criteria. Nearly one hundred years ago Paul Gauguin titled one of the summations of his life as a painter: "Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?" Today these questions are as inescapable as they were when he attempted to answer them with paint and canvas, and as long as they continue to be asked, great works of art and by extension the museums that present and define them in the face of a growing cultural relativism will have a central purpose in our lives.

EARLY ABSTRACTIONS
Paintings of the 40's and 50's
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The mild-mannered humanist

by Bruce Bawer

A friend of mine tells the following story: her son, an aspiring writer who is matriculating at an Ivy League university, was witnessing the classroom deconstruction of some classic text or other when a soft-spoken fellow student raised his hand gingerly and made a modest proposal. "Why," inquired the classmate—who had apparently been moved considerably by the masterpiece that was nominally under discussion—"do we have to take this approach to everything? Why can't we talk about this book in some other way? Why can't we discuss how it affects our emotions, and how it manages to do that?" The professor's response to this respectful suggestion was dismissive, if not downright contemptuous: "If you want to have that kind of conversation," he sniffed, "you might as well go back to high school." And the deconstruction proceeded apace.

Increasingly, that's the sort of intellectual atmosphere you'll find in university English classes nowadays: from the very first meeting of the freshman Introduction to Literary Analysis, professors make it clear to their youthful charges that the only intelligent way to think about literature in the late 1980s is to buy into one of the currently fashionable critical theories. It doesn't matter which brand of foolishness one chooses to pledge allegiance to: one may become a Marxist (and explain every aspect of a given work in socioeconomic terms) or a feminist (and reduce everything to sexual politics). Or one may become a deconstructionist, and subscribe to the notion that works of literature are closed systems, that characters are "verbal centers" with no resemblance to human beings, and that words are "floating signifiers." The important thing is that one reject liberal humanism, with its old-fashioned notion that literature has complex and subtle things to say about life and its naïve Arnoldian conviction that literary criticism's primary purpose is to identify the best that has been thought and said. That, as the man noted, is for high-school children.

In his new book, *The Pleasures of Reading: Thinking about Literature in an Ideological Age*, the distinguished critic Robert Alter raises his hand gingerly and makes a modest proposal of his own—namely, that practitioners of the new critical approaches recognize the enduring value of the methods and assumptions of liberal humanism, and make room at the academic table for its adherents.[1] Alter addresses himself particularly to the deconstructionist point of view, and takes aim especially at the deconstructionist conceit that literature is non-representational—that, in other words, only an unsophisticated reader could think of the action of a novel as resembling life in some way, or could see a character therein as an

1 *The Pleasures of Reading: Thinking about Literature in an Ideological Age*, by Robert Alter; Linden Press/Simon and Schuster, 256 pages, $18.95.

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imaginative rendering of a human being. As Alter writes, the deconstructionists' "attempts to undercut the mimetic validity of character . . . reflect the kind of sophistication that becomes its own egregious naïveté." Indeed, what such attempts often reflect is a thoroughly *false* sophistication, one which (in many instances) derives from a deep-seated fear of not being sophisticated enough. The history of post-structuralist criticism in America is an intricate one, but underlying all of it is a single uncomplicated circumstance: a couple of decades ago, unsettled by the fact that they were living in an age increasingly dominated by science, many English professors and graduate students started to feel very insecure and defensive about being in the English department and not, say, in the physics department.[2] Acutely aware that the science faculty across the quad were being paid several times what they would ever be paid, and intimidated by science itself in direct proportion to their ignorance of it, they began to fear that literature and literary criticism were embarrassingly *easy* compared to physics or calculus or biochemistry. If deconstruction, semiology, hermeneutics, and related approaches caught on very quickly after their arrival upon these shores, it is largely because they were exactly what such English-department types as these required in order to regain their self-respect: namely, an approach to literature that looked and sounded *scientific*. If science had its vocabulary of jargon, now criticism had one too—not a simple one of *form* and *theme* and *character* but an impressive Latinate one full of scientific-sounding words like *metataxis*, *signifier*, *logocentric*, and *exteriority*. Nor did the study of literature have truck, any longer, with such embarrassingly puerile things as emotions and human relationships: now it was exclusively about signs, systems, and other impersonal phenomena.

So it is that university literature faculties, as Alter observes, are "increasingly populated with scholars who don't particularly care for literature." This is a fair characterization, but it would be even more precise to say that, while these scholars don't mind literature *in its place*—that is to say, in the place which Derrida and his cohorts have chosen to give it—they don't care at all for the literary experience. For in order genuinely to experience a work of literature, one has to allow oneself to be emotionally vulnerable. One has to subordinate oneself to the work, to its author's machinations; one has to be prepared to care about its characters as if they were human beings (though, of course, there is no guarantee that one *will* care); one has to be ready, willing, and able to be moved by the work as strongly as if one has undergone an actual personal experience. Then, and only then, will one be in a position to record a legitimate critical response. Wordsworth declared that poetry "takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity"; one might propose that real literary criticism takes its origin from the emotion of a literary experience recollected—and comprehended—in tranquility.

Deconstructionist critics, naturally, don't feel happy with this formulation of the critical role. Rather than subordinate themselves to a work of literature, they prefer to subordinate the literary work and its author to themselves—in the process, of course, implicitly rejecting everything that makes the work worth reading and writing about. Accordingly, as Alter observes, "[t]he language of criticism now often reflects an emotional alienation from the imaginative life of the text under discussion, often seems in its bristling conceptually empty of an experiential ground in reading." Given this state of affairs—and given the insistence by

2 Or, for that matter, in medical school. On my first day of graduate school in 1979, the director of the Ph.D. program in English took one look at my GRE scores (which were more than satisfactory on the verbal portion, but even higher on the quantitative and analytical portions) and flabbergasted me by asking, "Why aren't you in medical school?"—as if he could not imagine why anyone would want to become a Ph.D. in English when he could conceivably become an M.D.

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many academic critics that "daily newspapers, pulp fiction, private diaries, clinical case studies, and imaginative literature belong on one level, that any distinctions among them are dictated by ideology"—it is not surprising that, in Alter's words, "so many among a whole generation of professional students of literature have turned away from reading," and have even adopted "an attitude sometimes approaching disdain for literature." ("Sometimes approaching" is putting it mildly.) "One need not argue," he says, "for an attitude of unreserved adulation toward literature, but without some form of a passionate engagement in literary works, without a sense of deep pleasure in the experience of reading, the whole enterprise of teaching and writing about literature quickly becomes pointless."

This, in a nutshell, is the central—and, needless to say, the thoroughly admirable—thesis of *The Pleasures of Reading*. But how to support such a thesis? Alter's strategy is to devote a chapter apiece to each of several properties of literature—character, style, allusion, structure, perspective—which have been relegated to the ash-heap of history by the proponents of literary theory. His intention, simply put, is to demonstrate that each of these things does in fact exist, and thereby to convince deconstructionists of the validity of the humanistic view of literature. But don't hold your breath: there's nothing here that the deconstructionists haven't heard a thousand times before. Take the chapter on character, the chief purpose of which is to show that characters are not merely "verbal clusters" but are indeed lifelike. What Alter does here is to identify several different types of characters that are found in fiction—among them, flat characters (such as M. de Renal in *The Red and the Black*), characters of "dynamic complexity" (such as Mme. de Renal), and characters that are "intensely, quite simply, themselves" (such as Dickens's comic grotesques)—then to describe famous examples of these types in precise, enthusiastic language, and finally assert these characters' strong resemblance to real people. After devoting four pages to the character of Esther Gobseck in *A Harlot High and Low*, for example, Alter writes that the pleasure of reading Balzac's novel "stems from the perception of a distinctive presence . . . . Esther is so intensely herself . . . the pleasure of discovery is in the verisimilar details of speech and gesture which manifest [Esther's] traits and motives so vividly." What this whole passage boils down to is a simple plea: *Can't you see? She's like a real person!* Alter gets an *A* for effort, but it's a futile effort, in my view: you may be able to lead a deconstructionist to literature, but you can't make him experience it. After all, if the greatest novels ever written can't convince a deconstructionist that literature is capable of representing life, then what hope does *The Pleasures of Reading* have?

Futile though his enterprise may be, Alter plugs on tirelessly in this fashion until the end of the book. For the reader who already accepts the validity of the concepts that Alter defends, these chapters constitute a very strange document indeed—a meandering, redundant catalogue of the most elementary verities of literature, their existence exhaustively attested to by examples from Defoe, Austen, Tolstoy, Balzac, Dickens, Melville, Wharton, Ford, Conrad, and Faulkner, among others, and by a lot of Brooks-and-Warren-style close readings. The author of several books on the history and structure of the novel, Alter devotes less attention to poetry than to fiction, less attention to the short story than to the novel and its antecedents (e.g., *The Iliad*, *La Princesse de Clèves*), and hardly any attention at all to drama outside of Shakespeare. The author of books on Fielding and Stendhal, he lingers over these two authors somewhat longer than he should, introducing points of discussion which don't seem directly relevant to his line of argument.

Alter is probably most well known for his scholarly work on the Old Testament and other Hebrew writings, and perhaps the most dubious tactic in the whole book is his extensive use of Biblical passages to support

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his arguments about the modalities of fiction. There are, after all, those to whom the Bible is something more (or something other) than a work of imaginative literature, and there are also those who are simply not used to thinking about it as such; accordingly, it seems a signal failure of judgment for Alter to begin discussing, say, King David as a "great fictional character" without preparing the reader at all. It's not as if the points which he illustrates by the use of Biblical passages could not just as easily have been illustrated by extracts from other, more straightforwardly literary works.

Even when he stays away from the Bible, Alter's line of argument is not always as strong as it might be. In his chapter on perspective, for instance, he quotes a passage from *The Secret Agent*, then proceeds to rewrite it from several different points of view; because these rewrites are inferior to the original, he concludes that "for the particular story a great writer has told and the particular world he or she has created as the arena of the story, the perspective actually used works better than any alternative we can imagine." This may well be the case, but Alter has not in fact demonstrated any such thing: to this reader, anyway, the weakness of Alter's rewrites has less to do with their differences of perspective from Conrad's original than with their stylistic shortcomings. Equally flawed is Alter's chapter on allusion, wherein he identifies four different kinds of allusion: "part to part," "part to whole," "whole to part," and "whole to whole."[3] The problem is that while these may well be valid distinctions, Alter doesn't make it clear why he considers them *important* distinctions; nor does there seem to be much point to his elaborate setting forth of examples of each type. (For instance, the references to "Annabel Lee" throughout *Lolita* constitute whole-to-whole allusion; the quotation in *Mrs. Dalloway* of three stanzas of a song from *Cymbeline* is whole-to-part.) Here and elsewhere in the book, one almost has the impression that Alter considers the very susceptibility of a given abstraction to categorization a proof of its validity as an object of critical thought. In any case, there are times when one feels that *The Pleasures of Reading* should have been called *The Pleasures of Pigeonholing*.

One can, of course, understand very well what must have motivated Alter to write this book. As a professor himself (he teaches Hebrew and Comparative Literature at the University of California at Berkeley), he doubtless comes into frequent contact with deconstructionists. Doubtless he likes many of them, respects their intelligence, and feels extraordinarily frustrated by their stubborn devotion to a fruitless school of para-thought. And doubtless he found himself thinking that if he were only to set down the truth in clear and friendly and reasonable terms, they could not fail to see the light. But the unfortunate fact is that deconstructionists don't mind the illogic of their approach; on the contrary, they revel in it. Truth, in their view, is an illusion, and logic a form of authority, ripe for subversion; the text owes fealty to nothing but itself. As the deconstructionist critic Vincent B. Leitch declares proudly (and with a mindless moxie entirely characteristic of the decon camp),

> We [deconstructionist critics] are celebrants of Misreading and inheritors of an indecipherable Scripture . . . . To produce, to write, we promote discontinuity. Mediums of metaphor and madness, we are not responsible, except perhaps for our will to power over texts and for our presumption in writing.

The critic John Simon has suggested that there are two possible ways to deal with this kind of thinking: "either to ignore [it] altogether or to laugh it out of—not

3 Incidentally, he dubs the last of these "midrashic" allusion, "remembering the tendency of the early rabbis in the Midrash to interpret Scripture by fleshing it out, recreating it in contemporary narrative terms." This coinage strikes one as unnecessary and pretentious, and too close for comfort to the deconstructionist jargon-mongering that Alter plainly deplores.

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existence, but importance." Alter does neither. Far from laughing at the deconstructionists, he addresses them deferentially, even (at times) supplicatorially; he comes off as the toothless English-department diplomat *par excellence*, scared to death of offending even the most irresponsible fellow faculty member. Phenomena which should properly be described as absurd or disgraceful (e.g., Terry Eagleton's proposal that departments of literature be abolished and replaced by departments of "discourse studies") he routinely brands "regrettable" or "lamentable"; when (à la George Orwell in "Politics and the English Language") he serves up three examples of horrible critical writing, he tells us that "for reasons of simple decency, I will not cite the sources or the authors' names." (What, pray tell, is indecent about citing the source of a piece of published literary criticism?) He even makes certain to remind us how modest he's being:

> . . . this is a study that is intended to be kept within modest limits.
>
> The claim I am making is a fairly modest one . . . : not that there is an immutable human nature but that there are certain lines of persistence that cross over from one era and one culture to another.

On those rare occasions when he does overtly take exception to deconstructive theories, Alter phrases his complaints in the most politic way possible. His most severely worded attack on deconstruction reads as follows: "[W]hat needs emphasis at this late point in the course of criticism is that literature cannot be adequately accounted for merely as a set of changing and arbitrary codes." (No one's ever going to mistake *him* for H. L. Mencken.) And this is how he begins a defense of the correspondence theory: "I realize that in certain circles the very concept of experience has been questioned, but what I mean by it here is simply this . . . ." Such passages invariably read like pathetic appeals. *Please grant me this point*, Alter continually seems to be saying, *it's really so minor!* Is this any way to roll back a critical revolution?

What's more, though he justly criticizes the prose of academic critics, Alter's own style doesn't serve his ends particularly well. It's almost invariably pallid, and quite often clumsy. "Linkages," he writes, "are what is eminently analyzable in the cohesion of most nonliterary texts"; a certain critic, he suggests, has popped Kafka "into a premade ideological cubbyhole"; Sutpen's hair in *Absalom, Absalom!*, as red as King David's, is "a motivic clue." Alter's prose is crawling with dull, hackneyed phrases: reading is an "endless, fascinating process"; when deconstruction came along, "these innovative lines of thought seemed to augur the dawning of a new era." Finally, there are times when Alter seems to be out to please the deconstructionists by using their lingo: he describes the lock of Belinda's hair in "The Rape of the Lock" as being "interinvolved" with her honor, virginity, and sense of self; and he characterizes the literary experience (more than once) as one of "high fun"—a patent attempt to appear consistent with the deconstructionist view of literature as a language game, as play.

Alter's use of such diction is hardly surprising. On the contrary, the surprise is that he, of all critics, should have written *The Pleasures of Reading* in the first place. For although he is now taking arms against a sea of anti-representational criticism, fifteen years ago—in *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre*—Alter was busy chiding his fellow critics for being too devoted to the idea of representation. Specifically, he complained that critics expect "'serious' fiction [to] be an intent, verisimilar representation of moral situations in their social contexts," and lamented the "lack of critical appreciation for the kind of novel that expresses its seriousness through playfulness, that is acutely aware of itself as a mere structure of words even as it tries to discover ways of going beyond words to the experiences words seek to indicate." This is not quite deconstruction, but it's getting

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there. While one does not gainsay Alter's right to change his mind (or his emphases), one would have appreciated an acknowledgment by Alter, in his new book, that he had indeed undergone such a change, and one would certainly be interested in knowing how the author of *Partial Magic* came to write the very different *The Pleasures of Reading*. The latter book might, in fact, have benefitted substantially from a brief discussion of what must have been a most compelling intellectual journey.

The existence of *The Pleasures of Reading* is, then, a puzzlement for more than one reason. No less a puzzlement is its issuance by a major trade publisher. How, one wonders, did this most unusual book come into being? Could it be that the remarkable success of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* led the editors at Simon and Schuster to believe that it might have a best-seller in a volume addressing itself to the closing of the academic mind? Perhaps; but I, for one, can't picture this book climbing to the top of the best-seller list. The plain fact is that it has no function except to debunk deconstruction, and—despite the revolution which the deconstructive movement has effected in the world of higher education—the general audience doesn't really know or care anything about deconstruction. Yes, the college-educated reader has a vague idea of what's going on in the English class—enough of an idea, perhaps, to know that he should apologize for the fact that he reads "for pleasure," enough of an idea to know that he's not reading *real* literary criticism unless it's obscure and packed with jargon. But he doesn't know where the battle lines have been drawn in the current lit-crit wars, and he doesn't know what's at stake; and Alter's bland, flatly written book isn't the sort of thing that's going to make him *want* to know.

All this is by way of saying that Alter might have stood a chance of capturing an audience had his style been more scintillating, his approach gutsier—had he, in other words, summoned up at least half the audacity of the typical deconstructionist and proceeded to nail the whole movement to the wall for everything it's done to destroy the study of literature. Instead of devoting his entire book to a low-key defense of liberal humanism, in short, he should have taken the offensive and launched a full frontal attack on the absurdities, grotesqueries, and hypocrisies of contemporary literary theory. For there is, at present, an urgent need for a book that would make the common reader sit up and take notice of the changes that deconstruction and related movements have wrought in the university classroom, a book that would spell out plainly the threat that they represent not only to the tradition of humanistic inquiry but to the culture at large. As it stands, *The Pleasures of Reading* is altogether too tame, too polite for this purpose: Robert Alter addresses himself to one of the most monumental conflicts in the intellectual life of our time and manages to make it seem little more than a polite academic disagreement. For all his good intentions and intelligent effort, it must be said that deconstruction deserves a far tougher critic than this, and liberal humanism a far more emphatic champion.

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Poems *by William Jay Smith, Richard Foerster & Sidney Wade*

A locket for Emily Dickinson

She walked into the church in early spring,
  Upon her father's arm a pretty picture . . .
—And in her dream she took a lover's ring,
  An emblem of delight and of conjecture.

Her life entire was like a letter home,
  A letter which no other woman wrote.
Read it with love: the lover bears no name;
  Her lineage lies golden on her throat.

—*William Jay Smith*

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Naming the plants along the Blue Ridge in late winter

for Robert Savage

You wield their magic Merlinwise, incant
the once anonymous world: You said

wintergreen as a chill on my tongue
acknowledged a fusion of seasons—

hibernal verdure in the tumble-brown
and layered years of leaves. When you said

hepatica and rolled the stone aside
to reveal the first small resurrections,

I stared into their cups and crowns
of light, their sympathetic lobes,

the liver-shapes that yield elixir,
and wanted to believe, seeing their loppy

ease atop the dead earth. Then you said
bloodroot and conjured ruddy souls for us

from the empty whiteness of its petals. And when
you let the syllables *rock tripe* tumble,

I watched the pale, curled flakes shudder,
take wing against the granite sky.

—*Richard Foerster*

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Championship ballroom dancing

for Juliet Prowse
and Terry Leone

Is a rhetoric in the eye.
We come in love and leave in love

With the expert conjugation of limbs
And feathers, high-heeled shoes and slender

Light. "Ooooh it's going to be a tough one
Tonight, Juliet." The consonants

Of fabulous form play on the eye
As guitar strings, strummed,

Thrum the ear. And ooooh the fat
And spangled mind will dragoon

The stunning sentences, will grimly
Note each misplaced moue,

Each faulty flourish and clarify
The prepositional grace, the long and

Lovely floor line, the gorgeous
Hem. The structure is grand,

The floor covered with proud
and demotic stars. In perfect

Rhyme and the present tense
They announce their favored metaphors:

Passa Doble, Fox Trot,
The Samba and Rhumba,

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And enhance their grammar
With fluid ornament. The mood

Of this discourse, periphrastic and plump,
Muscles up into lyrics of glamorous freight.

Silken transitions resonate in the air.
To meter and flare, substance

Is subordinate. God
How we love the dance.

—*Sidney Wade*

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Music

The great music director hunt

by Samuel Lipman

I seem to have spent a lot of time this past few months thinking—and writing—about people who lead orchestras. Sometimes my concern with these exotic creatures seems to me misplaced. Why, after all, should so much attention be paid to mere performers—indeed, performers who in fact make no sounds of any kind—rather than to composers whose accomplishments are of permanent, primary value? Then I realize just how much non-composing conductors, from Hans von Bülow in the second half of the nineteenth century to Arturo Toscanini and numerous others in our own, have meant to the dissemination of great music, and I realize that, for those of us who love what used to be called the art of tone, conductors are here to stay. Indeed, in their highest manifestation, that of music directors engaged to take responsibility for the entire artistic existence of an orchestra, they are indispensable.

Some of the proximate causes of my recent concerns have been fortuitous. I was asked to give talks on Pierre Monteux and Toscanini[1]; Herbert von Karajan's February appearance with the Vienna Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall seemed to me a chance—perhaps one not to be repeated—to hear, and write about, a concert by this historically great conductor.[2] Closer to home, at the end of last year the present leaderless condition of much of New York City musical and operatic life struck me as cause enough to write a survey of where we now stand and where those responsible for new directions might well look in the future. Inevitably, much of my discussion concerned the conducting leadership at the New York Philharmonic and the Metropolitan Opera.[3]

Then this past winter I was invited to participate in a symposium on the symphony orchestra at the Cleveland Institute of Music. This discussion, co-sponsored by the Cleveland Institute and Affiliate Artists (a non-profit New York City-based organization that assists young musicians, and particularly young conductors) arose out of the 1987 proposal by Ernest Fleischmann, managing director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, to deal with the widely perceived problems of American orchestras by increasing their personnel, absorbing their competition, and generally centralizing their roles in local communities.

I was invited to Cleveland, I suppose, because of my response in *The New Criterion* to Mr. Fleischmann's ideas, and because of the rather heated character of his subsequent letter to us and my comments

1 "Pierre Monteux and the Criterion of Success" was printed in *The New Criterion*, February, 1989; "Toscanini and the Love of Great Music" appeared in *The New Criterion*, May, 1989.

2 "Karajan: The Last Time?" may be found in *The New Criterion*, April, 1989.

3 "New York Music: The Crisis Continues" is in *The New Criterion*, January, 1989.

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on it.[4] I should add, too, that the symposium was but one event in a two-day conference centering on a series of master classes for young conductors. These classes utilized the playing services of the excellent student orchestra of the Cleveland Institute, and were presided over by the eminent East German conductor Kurt Masur, the present Music Director of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra.

In addition to Messrs. Fleischmann and Masur, my colleagues in the symposium were Thomas Morris, executive director of the Cleveland Orchestra, Richard C. Clark, the president of Affiliate Artists, John Mack, Cleveland's principal oboe, and Jack Renner, the chairman and recording engineer of Telarc, the audiophile recording label. Keeping order in the proceedings and adding wry comments of his own was Robert Finn, the music critic of the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*.

The somewhat hyperbolic title assigned the symposium was nothing less than "The Symphony Orchestra: Death—or Transfiguration?" As our moderator correctly assumed, everyone on the panel had assembled to serve music, and everyone acknowledged that something approaching a state of crisis had been reached in the existence of American orchestras.

Mr. Fleischmann opened by saying almost plaintively that he had not changed his opinions. The issue, he maintained, was not whether the orchestra was dead but what could be done to rescue the zest and the commitment of presently disaffected orchestra players. On his analysis, this rescue was absolutely necessary to revive the orchestra audience, now grown both smaller and older. Thomas Morris, the spokesman as it were for the home team, agreed on the seriousness of the crisis, but suggested that the true problem lay with orchestra boards, increasingly subject to an American bottom-line corporate mentality that had eyes only for balance sheets, not for art.

Kurt Masur, after acknowledging that he was the stranger at the table, spoke glowingly of how things were done in Leipzig: not only was there an orchestra of two hundred players, but there existed a conservatory, with the faculty drawn from the orchestra, and a tradition of filling orchestral positions from the ranks of conservatory graduates. The result, not surprisingly, was that in Leipzig musicians are more than content with orchestral careers.

With Richard Clarke, who was, I suspect, responsible for proposing the symposium in the first place, the discussion left the orchestra as an institution and turned to the person at the artistic helm of the orchestra—the music director. He saw in the renowned George Szell, the leader of the Cleveland Orchestra from 1946 to 1970, the ideal type of a conductor who was aware of the role of the orchestra in the community. For Mr. Clarke, the need was not for a musician who was a mere "exotic" conductor doing his concerts and then quickly leaving town but rather for someone who lives in the community, speaks to service organizations, and enthusiastically performs the myriad tasks necessary to becoming a part of local life.

For oboist John Mack, the problem was getting the money needed to pass on the best musical knowledge and taste. Much of it might come from the government, he said, though without increased government control. For recording company executive Jack Renner, "the audio-visual explosion" was a potent tool for delivering classical music to a generation saturated by popular music, and for bringing that generation of listeners into the concert hall itself.

My own contribution to the symposium will hardly be new to readers of *The New Criterion*. I said that an imposed concentration of musical activity was inapplicable to the American experience. I said that our orchestral situation has been formed by the absence of a new music that is viable for a large concert-going audience. And I located

4 "Is the Symphony Orchestra Dead?", my discussion of the Fleischmann proposal, may be found in *The New Criterion*, September, 1987; a letter from him in response, and my answer, appeared in our December 1987 issue.

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our present problems in the absence of sophisticated boards capable of hiring strong music directors; the lack of artistic commitment (particularly toward contemporary music) on the part of those who are hired; the inability of administrators to fill the resultant vacuum; and the use of crass marketing techniques to bring in audiences without regard to artistic purposes.

The discussion which followed our short presentations provided an increasing concentration on the role of the music director. Like everyone else, Mr. Fleischmann emphasized just how important a Szell, a Masur, or, for that matter, a Christoph von Dohnanyi (Cleveland's current conductor) is to the vitality of local musical life. He also stressed that artist managers, because they earn their commissions only from concert activity, prefer to have their clients travelling and conducting rather than staying in one place and attending to non-performing tasks.[5]

It did all seem to come down to commitment. To Mr. Finn's remark that Szell always left Cleveland for Salzburg immediately after the season ended, Mr. Morris responded with an anecdote, compelling even if apocryphal. It seems that the doorman at Severance Hall (where the Cleveland Orchestra gives its concerts) used to say that Szell, always the first one in the building on rehearsal days, once watched him sweeping and remarked, "You'll get more leverage if you hold the broom this way." Mr. Mack quite correctly added that Szell was the conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra whatever else he might be doing. Szell knew that the Cleveland players would do what he told them to do.

When I suggested that perhaps the present scale of orchestral activity was part of the problem—an activity necessitated by contracts guaranteeing more weeks' employment to players than can be filled with artistically justifiable events—there was much embarrassed laughter, but little discussion, save for comments that players everywhere want a reduction in their orchestral duties without any reduction in compensation.

At the very end of the discussion, the subject veered off to money, in particular to the need for more government money. My own position on funding of all kinds has always been that it cannot be intelligently considered until the *artistic nature and value* of what is to be funded has been identified. I did not feel that a discussion that had begun with art should end with dollars, so I told the old story about the Finnish composer Jean Sibelius preferring the company of bankers to that of musicians, because bankers talked about music. Because it seemed to me that throughout the afternoon the discussion of music directors had focused on extra-musical obligations that were essentially oriented toward marketing and publicity, I attempted to tie the afternoon's remarks to what I had witnessed at a conducting master class earlier in the day.

At this class four young conductors—I need not identify them further here, because in their abilities and their work I think they were quite representative of their peers—had led passages from two works, the *Ruy Blas* overture of Mendelssohn and the tone poem *Till Eulenspiegel* of Richard Strauss. To be sure, there were differences among the aspirants: one was more "exciting," another was more "sensitive," a third was more "graceful," as a fourth was more "decisive." But the work of all four was marked by an appalling failure to identify and correct orchestral mistakes, and thus to fulfill the proudest and most necessary function of the conductor: *teaching* the essential lineaments of the music being performed, first to the orchestra, then (through proper performance) to the audience.

5 In this regard, it is telling that before Dohnanyi was hired, the Cleveland Orchestra board required that he actually be domiciled in Cleveland (to use the term so beloved of federal, state, and local tax authorities). Thus, while of course he is free to travel and accept guest conducting engagements elsewhere, as music director of the Cleveland Orchestra Dohnanyi is in every way a Clevelander.

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Renovation, 1987, oil and alkyd on canvas, 52 x 57 inches

Walter
Hatke

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Instead of correcting errors, the conductors either failed to stop at all or, when a halt was unavoidable, simply repeated the passages in question more or less without comment. One moderately difficult string passage at the beginning of the Mendelssohn overture sticks in my mind to this day; it was raggedly executed the first time the work was essayed by the first young conductor, and remained ragged in the numerous repetitions that followed. Much the same was true of everything the orchestra played. Mr. Masur's interventions seemed limited to explaining the dramatic (i.e., the literary) content of the Mendelssohn and the Strauss works, and to asking each conductor to make clear to the orchestra just what he wanted them to do. Alas, none of the conductors seemed to have anything in mind.

When I said that a conductor must be a teacher, I was told that this function was now happily being exercised through the conductor's *talking to audiences*, either during or before concerts, about the pieces being played. When I said that the teaching I had in mind was done through musical performance, not through talking to the audience, there was no answer. The questions from the audience were predictable, and mostly concerned with Allan Bloom and the desirability or undesirability of cultural elitism.

In the symposium as a whole, at least on a personal level, a jolly time was had by all—certainly by me, and, I suspect (despite our verbal fisticuffs in *The New Criterion*) even by Mr. Fleischmann. On an intellectual level, to use Mr. Finn's apt metaphor, "many surfaces were scratched." Few were penetrated. As always, the purely artistic work done by artists seemed impossible to grapple with; as always, institutional fixes presented themselves as attractive in theory, even if not in practice. Mr. Finn, though finding me "full of Doomsday rhetoric" and "dour," didn't mention my comments about the young conductors in his otherwise admirably complete follow-up article in the *Plain*

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Dealer. In a subsequent article he discussed the manifold artistic and non-artistic demands made upon music directors, and found it unlikely that very many conductors could fulfill them. His closing paragraph sounds something like a death knell:

> So it would seem that those panelists who agreed that the music director is a key figure in keeping American orchestras alive are looking for a miracle. Or, perhaps, they believe in reincarnation. They seemed to be looking back at an era that is long since past.

Perhaps Mr. Finn is right in calling the hopes of music lovers something akin to bootless nostalgia—though I, for one, think that the splendid example of my friend and co-worker Gerard Schwarz and the Seattle Symphony Orchestra proves him wrong. Certainly most of the conductors in America today, famous and unfamous alike, resemble all too closely the four musicians I saw on that Sunday afternoon in wintry Cleveland. They fail to emulate such masters as Toscanini, Monteux, and Karajan in communicating to orchestras and audiences alike a definitive and authoritative conception, accurate in outline and details, of just how each piece goes.

In recent years I have attended the rehearsals of famous orchestras conducted by famous conductors; the musical action I have heard has been trifling in the extreme. Almost always basic details of execution are ignored, and essential features of the music are slighted. Instead there is an emphasis upon smiles and good feeling, upon the best possible superficially attractive outcome achieved with the least expenditure of time, effort, and money. Because the music itself remains essentially uncommunicated, rehearsals end with the players disaffected, and concerts end with the audiences bewildered. Predictably, all this is a disaster: what has been lost in both rehearsal and concert cannot be won back with the expenditure of even the highest conductorial charm at fundraising parties.

As I look back on my experience in Cleveland, one unpleasant thought keeps coming to mind: did the conductors I saw there, and by extension, do most of the conductors active today, really ***know*** the pieces they lead? Do they know them, that is, in the sense I believe Pierre Monteux knew what he conducted—as if they (and not the composers) had written the pieces themselves? If my suspicions are right, and if so many of today's conductors and music directors are not really ***musically*** competent to do their work, then all the present talk about conductors becoming part of the community, making speeches, and going to wienie roasts is worse than mere blather. It is wrong, and deeply harmful.

Musical shortcomings cannot be remedied through attendance at charm school; they can only be remedied through education, in this case through vastly improved ***musical*** education. Just how good is the training given conductors—and all classical musicians—today, and how high are the standards for entrance into training programs and for graduation from them? To answer these questions is quite different from instituting newsworthy educational gimmicks that do nothing but arrange meaningless educational exchanges and manipulate the curriculum. It requires instead tough decisions about what is taught, who is hired and fired, who is accepted and rejected, and who passes and who fails; it requires tough decisions about what is expected of teachers, students, and performers alike. So in the end it does all come down to teaching and to learning, those neglected, derided, but ultimately irreplaceable activities in our concert halls, in our schools, and everywhere in art.

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Art

Keeping the faith

by Jed Perl

At the beginning of this century the most adventuresome painters and sculptors took it for granted that anything in art that was going to *feel* radically new was also going to *look* radically new. For Picasso, Matisse, and a host of other artists this wasn't a matter of theory, it was a matter of fact. Since the 1860s, when Manet introduced a style of virtuoso informality into easel painting, most of the wonderful art created in France embodied unconventional ideas of pictorial structure. Monet, Seurat, Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Cézanne changed the face of painting; Fauvism and Cubism went further yet. We can still argue whether these transformations of tradition were intended as assaults on the past or as renewals of the past (they were probably some of both). But whatever the intent, in practice it amounted to the same thing: art looked different.

Now we're into a new period, a period when the best contemporary art expresses feeling through subtle though critical shifts in received structures. What feels radically new doesn't any longer look radically new. At least, this is what I conclude from the art that interests me the most as I make the rounds of the galleries. Postmodernism is an attempt to deal with this dramatically changed situation; but postmodernism is as obsessed with new styles as twentieth-century art has ever been. The search for radical formal innovations continues; and no matter how quixotic a search it becomes, it continues to absorb vast amounts of energy. Meanwhile, everything in art that's emotionally authentic and plastically vital is made to feel marginal; it's presented as retro-chic or neo-traditionalism, or is ignored. This is the central conundrum of our art scene: innovation-for-the-hell-of-it is obscuring the real developments.

It's difficult to say at exactly what point in the century art that looked radically new ceased to feel radically new. In the Twenties, while artists such as Mondrian, Masson, and Miró were still turning painting inside out with extraordinary results, Matisse and Picasso were already looking to renew themselves through an engagement with older structures. We have yet to catch up with the significance of Renoir, who achieved transcendent greatness only after he rejected Impressionism in favor of a style of coloristic chiaroscuro based on Titian and Rubens. What fascinated Picasso and Matisse—and Derain, Braque, and Dufy—was that the more "conservative" Renoir's work became structurally, the more explosive it became emotionally. Renoir was going back to the future, and that's where we must go today.

But as the School of Paris led the way in the search for new feelings within old forms, the search for new forms was taking on a life of its own. Duchamp was the first artist to invent forms that had nothing to do with feelings—that, indeed, ruled out feelings altogether. After World War II, the Abstract Expressionists became the last artists to bring forth a new form that actually

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suggested a new feeling. But with Pollock and de Kooning it was no longer the case that the more radical the form, the more radical the feeling. The Abstract Expressionists turned structure inside out and achieved a small effect; as did Donald Judd, with his new ideas about sculpture. By the 1960s radical formal innovation had become, pretty much, a variety of academic exercise. But nobody knew it outside of a few artists. When Fairfield Porter said that he preferred Vuillard to Cézanne, and late Vuillard to early Vuillard, he was speaking for what was most advanced in American art. Still, his message fell on deaf ears.

The most highly publicized events of the current season are all further episodes in the devaluation of feeling. The Jeff Koons show at Sonnabend, the Warhol retrospective at the Modern, and the Whitney Biennial take us further down a road that was mapped out at least five years ago when the aesthetics of numbness, previously a matter of taste and fashion, were codified in the writings of the poststructuralists.

A few weeks ago I was having lunch with a painter, and as we got to the espresso he blurted out: "Hey, we haven't even mentioned Koons!" Some claim to have been bowled over by Koons's polychrome appropriations of souvenir-shop figurines, and Koons is now regarded as a key figure on the scene. He has pushed the gross-out threshold a bit further, and his current brand of kitsch, though Pop art based, is distinct from anything Warhol or anybody else ever did. Yet the thumbs-up reviews by Peter Schjeldahl (in *Seven Days*), Adam Gopnik (in *The New Yorker*), and Sidney Tillim (in *Arts Magazine*) strike me as intellectual riffs, literary impersonations of an experience that couldn't possibly have taken place at Sonnabend. Critics continue to buy into Pop art, perhaps because they believe that anything that so many people find enjoyable as art must be good for art. Pop was never formally inventive; and Koons is just another artist who's taken the path of least resistance. His white-faced Michael Jackson is more or less what can be expected from a tradition that's been stuck inside a Brillo box for a quarter of a century.

For a couple of years in the early Sixties, Andy Warhol was an original Dadaist wit. The hedonistic cleverness of the paint-by-number paintings, the Marilyns, and the soda pop bottles is something special, whether one calls that something high Camp or all-American fun. But Warhol's was a wee talent; and even early on his Dadaist hipster approach had a nasty and ponderous side—as in the trumped-up theatrics of the Disasters and Electric Chairs. Almost from the start, Warhol was trashing his talent, but that's nothing next to the way the Modern has trashed itself by giving Warhol the biggest retrospective of a modern artist that New York has seen since the Picasso marathon of 1980. Basically, the Warhol retrospective is a Whitney show—it's upscale bread and circuses. It's a Whitney show mounted with the kind of money and scholarly panache that the Whitney has rarely commanded.

Meanwhile, over at the Whitney itself, the Biennial picks up on the subdued mood of the last one, in 1987. The fourth floor includes some artists whose work interested me in the galleries over the past year. Chris Macdonald commands a large space with the hunky humor of his wood contraptions, while Andrew Spence's minimalist abstractions (especially *Swivel Chairs*) are winning in their combination of brightness and gravity. And there is no denying that the scene as you come off the elevator onto the second floor is elegant, with the pale, virtually black-and-white works of Brice Marden hanging across from the darker, also virtually black-and-white works of Ross Bleckner. Then the second room, with brightly colored abstractions by Cary Smith and David Reed, quickens the senses a little bit. It's not a bad installation; it draws you through the show. Basically the curators' taste is for anything that looks marginally unlike what they've seen before. It's a succession of mild visual impressions. What the artists imagine to be risk-taking is really

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a matter of surface gestures; there's almost nothing in the show that gets under your skin, that you want to linger over. When I'd gone through the whole show I wasn't offended; I felt brain dead. So what else is new at the Whitney?

In the 1980s the Whitney has taken an increasingly important role in molding public attitudes toward contemporary art. Until recently this was more or less by default, since our other museums of twentieth-century art were only marginally interested in the present. Now, with new directors at the Modern (Kirk Varnedoe) and the Guggenheim (Thomas Krens), both of whom have made their interest in the contemporary scene a matter of record, the Whitney continues to shape taste, but with a number of other institutions eager to follow in directions where the Whitney has led the way. Both the widespread affection accorded Varnedoe (an NYU professor and long-time player at MOMA) and the skepticism that has greeted Krens (a newcomer to the city who can sound frighteningly high-tech in interviews) are first impressions. Krens's first major show, "Refigured Painting: The German Image 1960-1988," went down in April after receiving a very bad press.[1] Neo-Expressionism had been old hat when MOMA mounted "Berlinart" two summers ago; and Krens, who wants to make fashion, found himself accused of not keeping up.

One indication of what Varnedoe has in mind for the Modern is the new Artist's Choice series, which gives contemporary painters and sculptors the opportunity to do creative curatorial work with the museum's permanent collection. "Burton on Brancusi," the initial installment of Artist's Choice, is a safe bet. Scott Burton's furniture sculpture—tables and chairs in stone and other materials—has become the corporate lobby art of the 1980s; and when Burton, who has written a pamphlet to go with the show, puts Brancusi's *Bird in Space* and *Cock* on a white Parsons-style table, or takes Brancusi's *Fish* off its base and exhibits the base alone, he's merely observing that Brancusi's genius can be whittled down to the level of Burton's own fairly middling talents. It doesn't do anything for Brancusi; but it makes Burton look like an intellectual. Burton's noodling around in the collection is reversible, and so in a sense no one is the worse for it. If I were more interested in Burton's work, I'd be more interested in his installation. (Give Leland Bell carte blanche to organize a show at MOMA, and I'd be the first in line to see what he came up with.)

The issues that the Artist's Choice series raises are bigger than Scott Burton. Burton, "Burton on Brancusi," and Artist's Choice are merely instruments through which Kirk Varnedoe means to assert the relevance of the Modern to the contemporary scene. In a conversation with Michael Brenson of the *Times,* Varnedoe said that "the Modern has a very well-deserved reputation for scholarship, for securing the dates and sources of modern art. But modern art did not become dominant by that route alone. It also functioned by interpretations and misinterpretations that gave artists permission to do what they needed to do. We are not just a source of scholarly information but a resource for generating the new." In my opinion this last statement—one that reflects widely held ideas both within and without the museum world—is a phantasm. It might be a particularly American-type phantasm. Since all of New York's major repositories of modern art were formed in direct response to the rise of the modern movement, the curators here have somehow gotten around to believing that they played an integral part in this development. New York curators like to disparage their colleagues and ancestors in Paris, who pretty much refused to buy—or were utterly unaware of—the most exciting art that their city was producing between 1880 and 1950. Perhaps Kirk Varnedoe imagines that he wouldn't have made some of the mistakes that were made on the other side of the Atlantic. But who are we to say that the indifference that French art

1 "Refigured Painting" is reviewed in this issue on page 51. —Ed.

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institutions showed to contemporary French art was a mistake? Has the "relevance" of our museums had anywhere near as vital an effect on art as the "irrelevance" of the Louvre?

When Picasso said that museums were "just a lot of lies" he spoke for an entire era. What he meant was that museums could barely make sense of the past and certainly knew nothing of the present. I will not deny that European painters from the Post-Impressionists to the Surrealists felt a great bitterness about the indifference of art institutions; but they didn't know how good they had it. Basically, the inventors of modern art evolved their own institutions: independent salons; galleries, from Vollard's and Kahnweiler's to Denise René's and Maeght's; and magazines, such as *Cahiers d'Art*, *Minotaur*, and *Verve*. These are the models that we should be following. The time has come to stop looking to the museums for guidance on contemporary art. History tells us that museums have never guided us in the past; nothing in the 1980s indicates that they can do so today.

Many of the people I talk to these days are looking for something other than Jeff Koons. But if I tell them that an artist they're familiar with has made a breakthrough, or that there's a wonderful new still-life painter out there—well, the reaction I get is often less than enthusiastic. Even though people are sick of the search for something totally new, they're itching for a revolution in style. If only they could get over that, they'd realize that feelings are evolving all the time.

Development—gradual, evolutionary development—is all. It makes the difference between the artist who's just administering shocks and the artist who draws us in and carries us along. Carroll Dunham, in his show this winter at Sonnabend (his first there; he used to show at Baskerville & Watson), proved himself to be an artist who can develop. It was a development that startled me, because Dunham has found a way of giving up what had been most beguiling in his work—the droll doodlings he did on surfaces of wood veneer—and making himself a more convincing artist. Working now on sheets of white ragboard, he's been creating paintings that each contain a single mutant form—a form that's like some biological freak, half Jetson cartoon, half medical illustration of the internal organs. Dunham's graphic elegance (he uses pencil scribbles to create funnel-like growths and surround the big form with lots of jittery activity) gives shapes that ought to feel creepy a piquancy that draws you in. And the work is less flamboyantly scattershot than heretofore. Looking at his paintings (which are basically one color each: harsh pink, orange, violet, blue) is like looking at some weird insect—your reaction is somewhere between discomfort and amazement. There's plastic invention (and, perhaps, a debt to Picasso's single-form semi-abstractions of 1927-29) in the way that shapes thrust and bend, giving a sense of torsion to the painting as a whole.

Dunham's work has always brought Cy Twombly to mind; in the new work, there's a connection to the Twomblys of the early Fifties that were shown at Sperone Westwater over the winter. I have a fundamental aesthetic difference with both Twombly and Dunham. While they believe that a painting is an inflected surface, I believe that a painting is a self-contained fiction. I don't find Dunham's imagination particularly interesting; and the arrangement of his show, in which each painting was cooked up using the same recipe, didn't give the impression of an artist who has more than one thing on his mind. Dunham is an artist I can't really give my heart to—he's so cool, so controlled. He's an artist I watch going along in another direction. What I wasn't sure of before and am sure of now is that he's *going*.

Some developments are harder to track than Dunham's because they involve smaller, more elusive shades of feeling. Louisa Matthiasdottir is the kind of painter whom people claim has been doing the same paintings for almost fifty years. In a general sense, they may be right. But she has her low points, which include, these days, most of

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her landscapes and animals, and her astronomical high points, which include, in her show at Schoelkopf this spring, the *Squash with Blue Cloth* (36" by 62"). This still life, with a few squash arranged on a tabletop beneath a great expanse of gray light, is of a type that's appeared fairly often in Matthiasdottir's shows in the past decade. Looking at the earlier versions, one knew that she was giving herself a formal challenge: she wanted those few objects to hold the space; she wanted to fill space without filling it. But those earlier versions had a wishy-washy effect—space just seemed to float away. What brings it all together this time is a matter of small things: the placement of the squash in vertical and horizontal positions that move our eyes beyond the object, through the space; and the unemphatic virtuosity of the paint handling, which opens up the forms without rupturing the very satisfying sense of the painting as a two-dimensional design. The brown pitcher in the painting is as monumental as a still-life object in a Louis Le Nain. The softness of some of the earlier still lifes in this series was a problem; they felt faint. But that wonderful pearly softness now co-exists with a clarity of form.

Matthiasdottir is in her seventies; but her work has never been more relevant than it is right now. *Squash with Blue Cloth* is a painting in which nothing new is invented, and yet it feels new, and would look good hanging next to a Zurbarán, or a Chardin, or a Matisse. What more can I say? This is the kind of Matthiasdottir I adore: you can bask in it when you're in the gallery, and you can think about it afterward—think about the way the tabletop becomes a projection of the flat surface of the canvas, a projection into the third dimension of a planar geometry.

Matthiasdottir's still lifes take us to a point where art and nature meet. They grow out of the rich soil of French painting, the same soil that gave birth to modern painting. What interests Matthiasdottir is how the sense of life can be transformed into the idea that is a painting; and how the abstraction of experience that is a painting in turn recapitulates the sense of life. Our century began with exactly these sorts of concerns—not only in Matisse, but also in the early representational work of Mondrian and Kandinsky. While New York is now a mecca for painterly realists, their essential place in art culture is little understood. Or at least that has been the case up until now. There's a widespread desire to get over the fast-forward approach to art, and in some unexpected quarters painterly representation is resurgent. In Darryl Hughto's show at Salander O'Reilly earlier this year, it was surprising to see that a well-known formalist abstractionist was painting figures. The mythic men and women who fill *Three Muses* and *Hero* are done in the same acrylic gel medium that has long been favored by Color-field painters. These paintings may be done, as the announcement explains, "from life," but life, in Hughto's terms, is constrained by a concept of flatness derived from Pollock via Greenberg. In this approach, nature isn't a challenge to abstraction; it's just a victim, to be steamrollered. The flatness of Hughto's figures is a lot less engaging than the flatness of Matthiasdottir's still lifes, where the idea of the plane is derived from Mondrian and Léger.

Painterly representation has its limits; it will never give us the joy of discovering a new pictorial universe or a new idea of what a painting can be. But when ideas in art have become as utterly divorced from experience as they are today, the painter who works directly, transforming what he sees with his eyes, can seem like the rock of sanity we all need to keep in view. When I see a show like Marilyn Lerner's at John Good in February—where the ideas about geometric abstraction are moderately interesting but the painting is dead, like graphic design—I want to tell the artist, "Go and learn from what a terrific flower painter can do!" In April, the two finest flower painters at work today, separated by a generation in age, both had shows. Nell Blaine (at Fischbach) and Rita Baragona (at Bowery) are bourgeois sensualists—they use garden flowers to give us lessons in the fundamentals of painting.

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When done with their kind of lyric zest, flower painting becomes a metaphor for painting itself: color-as-form, that's all it is. The vase on the table, the tablecloth, the view out the window: in a sense these are proprieties, the manners and conventions that frame what is in essence an exercise in back-to-basics. The excitement one feels before these paintings has to do with the nakedness of the process. That only a half dozen or so of Blaine's voluptuous oils or Baragona's more severe acrylics are totally convincing is perfectly all right. Starting from scratch every time is the flower painter's chosen destiny. Taken together, Blaine and Baragona are the paragon of a living tradition.

One day in April I saw the Blaine and Baragona shows with David Hockney's show at Emmerich sandwiched in between. Hockney seemed to fit. This was Hockney's most restrained appearance in years; it was as if, after the overkill of the Met retrospective, he wanted to prove to doubters that he could get down to business. And—damn it!—there's something to Hockney. Here he was painting variations on a number of Picassoid themes. Hockney's painting of a Malibu beach house echoes those wonderful little trecento-inspired landscapes that Picasso did at Cannes in the Fifties, only Hockney has severe problems with color. The most heartfelt of Hockney's homages to Picasso is a small portrait bust of a young man, *Thanasie*, done in the Renoiresque, Pompeiian-pink palette that Picasso adored. Picasso saw the link between neoclassicism and homoeroticism; and Hockney, following Picasso, produces a Pompeiian youth. Conceptually, Hockney is giving one hundred percent in this painting. Emotionally, he's giving one hundred percent, too: you can feel him taking in that pale skin, dark hair, heart-shaped mouth, those amber eyes. But formally, Hockney is giving, oh, forty percent: the face isn't quite credible, it's not full enough. Looking at this portrait, I wish that Hockney would go the distance, because there's something delicate and penetrating about his imagination. This jazzy illustrator knows a thing or two about life and love. Maybe if Hockney locked himself in the studio for three or four years, he could find a way to put what he knows into his work, instead of leaving it tacked on top. With Hockney everything comes down to a question of character—whether he has enough of it to use and not abuse his talent.

The question of character is the essential question right now. Never before in art has talent meant so little, character meant so much. When taste is generally elevated it may be possible for talent to float upward. But when taste is down in the gutter, as it is now, brute talent drowns. Character is all that can save an artist. Gallery-goers have to be willing to discover character, to become connoisseurs of character. Of course character isn't sexy, or at least not until you've let it work on you for awhile. We must wait patiently for the moment when character bursts forth and becomes inspiration. Artists today are evolving slowly, finding themselves in their thirties, and only beginning to paint great paintings in their fifties and sixties.

To ask patience of the audience is to ask a great deal. But what choice do you have? What does a person do when he's gone to fifteen galleries in an afternoon and seen nothing that he cares to think about afterward? He can give up. Or he can keep going, ferreting out the good things that are to be found here and there. The artists *are* still working. And some of them are marvelous. If we can just get over the irrational desire to be bashed over the head by art that gives us nothing but a headache—then we can leave behind the search for new forms, focus on the evolution of new feelings, and move ahead. History tells us that renaissances often come at the turn of the century.

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Refiguring the Guggenheim

by Karen Wilkin

German art certainly makes New York museums do odd things. The Museum of Modern Art made special efforts for the recent Anselm Kiefer retrospective, allowing it to overflow the lower level temporary exhibition galleries into prime space upstairs. For the one hundred seventy or so exhibits of "Refigured Painting: The German Image 1960-1988,"[1] the Guggenheim jammed almost every inch of the museum and added some remarkably unfortunate partitions, most notably a monstrous tower that completely altered Frank Lloyd Wright's celebrated central space. Installing "Refigured Painting" required that a sizable chunk of the previous exhibition, a selection of postwar art from the Guggenheim's own collection, be removed a week before the announced closing date, to the bewilderment and rage of late visitors.

The Modern's decision to spread the Kiefer exhibition beyond the space usually allotted to temporary exhibitions was dictated by the properties of Kiefer's work and was essential to our understanding of his capabilities. Without that extra room of super-monumental paintings, we would have been deprived of some of his most typical and most successful pictures and our sense of Kiefer's achievement would have been less accurate. But what justified the Guggenheim's decision to sabotage its own earlier exhibit and to insert that looming wedge in the center of its soaring space? It must have been sheer enthusiasm for quantity; it certainly wasn't the quality of the works in the show, nor the exhibition's power to illuminate.

The title, "Refigured Painting," suggested that the show might be an inquiry into shared aesthetic concerns, something that might help sort out what was worth paying attention to among current German artists, particularly among those who use recognizable imagery. Perhaps the show would examine the larger issue of subject matter in late twentieth-century painting. I held on to these expectations even after I saw the list of artists included in "Refigured Painting," neatly cross-indexed by ramp position, mounted near the Guggenheim's elevator. But my hope of a precisely focused show that might sharpen or clarify my perception of present-day German art was not fulfilled. What the Guggenheim presented was an incoherent, confusing, often irritating catch-all of largely dismal work that at the same time managed to exclude key figures.

1 "Refigured Painting: The German Image 1960-1988" was at the Guggenheim from February 11 through April 23. It is on view through July at the Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf and will then travel to the Schirn Kunsthall in Frankfurt (September through November). The catalogue, published by the Guggenheim in conjunction with Prestel-Verlag, is edited by Thomas Krens, Michael Govan, and Joseph Thompson (289 pages, $50 in hardcover, $30 in paperback).

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"It's an American point of view, of course," my friend Hans Peters of the Düsseldorf Kunstmuseum and a contributor to the catalogue, told me. "They have done a good job." But did the American point of view provide an accurate or even an adequate vision of what Peters perceived to be the state of contemporary painting in Germany? Were we being offered any insight into its evolution? The familiar names were all there—Kiefer, Richter, Polke, Baselitz, Penck, Lüpertz, and company—and even some unfamiliar ones. But where among the older generation was Emil Schumacher, with his moody, half-glimpsed, evocative images? Where among the young hotshots was Walter Stohrer, with his brash, emphatic canvases? "I had to fight for the inclusion of early Salome," Dr. Peters told me. "At least I convinced them that Horst Antes was an important forerunner." Strangest of all, where was Joseph Beuys, the declared mentor of at least three quarters of present-day German painters? Surely Beuys's insistence on the iconic power of specific objects had something to do with the notion of a German image, of "refiguration."

The catalogue provides few answers. The new director of the Guggenheim, Thomas Krens, in a repellent, jargon-filled essay, espouses an odd thesis. Modernism is equated with abstraction and emptiness, which Krens declares to be outmoded and to have been replaced by figuration (but sometimes abstraction) generated by postmodernist attitudes. (I may have this wrong; Krens's prose is difficult to unravel.) Chiefly, his essay deals with the critical writing surrounding contemporary German art and not with the art itself. Other essays, some translated from German, are more lucid and deal with context and history. It seems that a generation of German artists and art lovers, raised to believe that only abstraction was up-to-date and worth taking seriously, have rebelled against this dictum, which is, coincidentally, a concomitant of American economic domination during the reconstruction of postwar West Germany. In a cultural revolution parallel to Germany's re-acquisition of economic power and autonomy, some German artists have, since the 1960s, returned to their roots, to myth, literature, history, culture in general, and to their twentieth-century ancestors, the Expressionists. This daring generation and their followers have restored the image to painting. Of course, the notion of imagery is subject to very broad interpretation, so present-day German painters feel no compulsion to work in any one particular mode. All of this has something to do with the (postmodernist) condition of being deluged with visual "information" in our daily lives. It also, apparently, has a lot to do with the German experience of the Second World War, of collective guilt and of living in a divided country; it should be pointed out, however, that the majority of the painters in "Refigured Painting" were born in West Germany and almost two thirds of them after 1945.

If the German painters of the 1960s had been the only ones, or the first, to turn their attention to figuration after a long drought, all of this would be more noteworthy. But painting with varying degrees of recognizable imagery, from offhand Pop references to meticulous super-realism and everything in between, has been alive and well in Great Britain and the U.S. for some decades now. As to the much discussed "dominance" of abstraction, a quick look at sales records will testify to the consistently higher prices of figurative Pop art as compared to even the most admired abstraction. And I'm old enough to remember the excitement and relief with which Diebenkorn's, Park's, and Bischoff's broadly brushed figures and interiors were greeted when they were first exhibited in New York in the early Sixties; here at last was the art of the future—painting that combined the gesture of Abstract Expressionism with *something you could recognize.* Not to mention the de Kooning women of the early Fifties. What, then, was new about the work at the Guggenheim? The brutality and downright ineptness of so much of it.

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Amazingly, out of forty-one painters, not one was capable of making color expressive or unpredictable. Almost none was able to draw at large scale without generalizing or lumpishness. Almost none seemed to care how paint went down or what surfaces looked like. The first generation of German Expressionists deliberately tried to make barbaric, primitive-looking images in defiance of academic tradition and in revolt against a repressive, rigid, middle-class society. They looked to the Cubists and Fauvists for guidance, turning the wrenching of perception of Cubism and the intensification of color of Fauvism to their own ends, using these formal inventions to suggest rage and violence. The present generation attempts, for the most part, to adopt this language wholesale, inflating the scale of earlier paintings to gigantic size and, curiously, losing intensity along the way. Yet we are asked to believe that all these deadened surfaces, this garish color and crude rendering, are as deeply and honestly motivated as the ferocious, often incisive paintings of the first generation, that they are a rejection of the sleek classicism approved by Hitler and a response to a peculiarly German postwar condition of rich cultural inheritance and *Angst*. (I keep thinking about all those post-1945 and even post-1950 birth dates.) Paradoxically, most of the work on the Guggenheim's ramps, over the elevator and on the wedge, was both inordinately aggressive and totally inert.

In 1985, I saw, within a few weeks of one another, an unwieldy survey exhibition at the National Gallery in Berlin called something like "German Art 1945-85" and an ambitious effort at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, entitled "German Art in the 20th Century: Painting and Sculpture 1905-85." The Berlin show seemed to include everyone—young artists on the upper level, older and dead artists relegated to the lower floor. It was hard to sort out individual works from the general cacophony, but a few of the older generation emerged as giants, especially in comparison with the free-for-all upstairs. Emil Schumacher was probably the best painter in the show. (His work stood out in the same way in other collections of contemporary German art that I later visited.) The overwhelming impression of the Berlin show, however, was that Germany had just as many bad artists as New York, and most of them worked larger than their American counterparts.

I expected to see many of the artists in the Berlin exhibition at the Royal Academy, given the all-encompassing title. Yet "German Art in the 20th Century," organized by a team headed by the modish Berlin-based curator Christos Joachimedes, was as exclusive as the Berlin show was unselective. As an exercise in art in the service of politics, it was less egregious than Marie de Medici's commissioning Rubens to paint that vast cycle, in the Louvre, glorifying her role in the government of France, but the Royal Academy show was a contender. The aim was clearly to establish a line of inheritance for a particular faction of contemporary German artists and, presumably, to discredit the claims of the rest. The historical portion of the exhibition was comprehensive, informative, and stunning; the generations from between the two world wars and immediately following World War II were erratically selected (and generally unmemorable); the contemporaries were a select few—Beuys, Kiefer, Richter, Polke, Baselitz, Penck, Lüpertz, and so on—the sole legitimate heirs of the artists so lavishly displayed in the earlier portion of the show: Der Blaue Reiter, Die Brücke, Neue Sachlichkeit. Ironically, the German Expressionist paintings more or less eclipsed the art for which they were supposed to provide ancestry and context.

The Guggenheim's exhibition, conceptually, lay somewhere between the unadulterated politicking of the Royal Academy show and the unquestioning acceptingness of the Berlin National Gallery. Qualitatively, it was about on a par with the upper floor of the Berlin show. Some painters were represented by mini-retrospectives, others by a single work. (I found myself counting bays

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to see who had been awarded the most space: Lüpertz 6, Richter 5, Hödicke 3, Polke 2—but Polke's were bigger.) Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke were, not surprisingly, presented as founders and leading exponents of "refiguration," as senior painters whose work served as some sort of touchstone. Kiefer, perhaps even better known to New York viewers, was enshrined in the rectangular gallery below as a member of a younger generation. On the ramps between, likeness of theme seemed to be the organizing principle. Some excessively nasty stuff using hanks of human hair was installed, illuminatingly, next to three collaged works by another painter. Two of A. R. Penck's stick-figure images, one a truly abominable technicolor effort, the other an astonishingly better black-and-white picture, were displayed on one side of the wedge-shaped tower. A collection of bombastic recent Baselitzes, mostly courtesy of Mary Boone and Michael Werner, were lined up like trophies on the other side.

Richter's work, particularly, defined one of the exhibition's primary assumptions—that imagery is illustration of concept, to the exclusion of everything else. Richter's cold, unyielding pictures declare him to be primarily a conceptual artist. He treats all of his subject matter, whether figures, landscape, or the appearance of abstract painting, with the same indifference to its actual properties, including just what the image is. The effect of a series of Richters is greater than that of a single work, especially, as in the Guggenheim show, if the series spans several years. His systematic, dispassionate "strategies" become evident. He appears to be doggedly transcribing an almost random set of images from the reproductions in a representative group of art magazines, preserving only too faithfully the mechanical, homogenized quality of the printed page. Sometimes his sources are not art magazines, but more mundane, everyday documents, like commercial color charts and newspaper photos.

Polke's paintings, which have interested me more in the past than they did at the Guggenheim, share something of Richter's held-back quality, but he can't wholly dissemble his feeling for paint as a sensuous physical substance. How paint goes on matters to Polke. He exploits the associative power of different kinds of application—drips, floods, mechanical transfers, "hand-made" drawing, and the like—just as he does his fragmented images. Contrasts between the familiar and the fantastic, the recognizable and the barely grasped, are echoed, in Polke's pictures, by contrasts of touch. As is often the case with Kiefer, image and stuff do not always coalesce, nor does their failure to do so seem deliberate. Like Kiefer's combinations of loaded surfaces and conventional, illusionistic drawing, Polke's paintings often snap from one visual plane to another without necessarily gaining anything from the resulting tension.

Polke can be lyrical and high-strung in a way that Richter is not, just as Kiefer can be more theatrical and dramatic. But there is a pervasive sense that none of them really trusts *painting* to be expressive, none of them has complete faith in the ability of his materials to carry the imprint of his individual personality. Despite the range of applications in Polke's work and the piled-on encrustations of Kiefer's, despite the hide-and-seek quality of Polke's imagery and the complex iconography of Kiefer's, neither painter—nor Richter, for that matter—seems particularly interested in the visual aspect of painting. Richter is, oddly, most frank about this. The neutrality of the objects he makes, the apparent arbitrariness of his images, make it obvious that idea takes precedence over appearance. It's an attitude that pervades much of the work in "Refigured Painting." Most of the painters don't seem to have cared what their pictures looked like.

There are exceptions, of course. Marcus Lüpertz's work is solid, curiously old-fashioned, but apparently *felt* and well painted—in the best possible sense. Picasso has served Lüpertz well (as he did early Baselitz, before Baselitz hit upon the trick of hanging his pictures upside down),

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providing him with firm drawing and dense construction. A series of modestly sized still lifes with melons strangely recalled Tamayo, of all people, but, as is always the case with Lüpertz, he declared himself to be a painter, not a theoretician. Lüpertz's implied narratives, his allusions to war and myth, are achieved by purely visual means.

K. H. Hödicke is perhaps closest to his Expressionist ancestors. His paintings often look like grotesquely enlarged Kirchners, without the bite. How unnecessary their large scale really is becomes apparent in the catalogue. The reproductions, which reduce Hödicke's images to something more modest, are often better than the paintings. When he is least self-consciously "expressive," in a series of views out of a window, for example, Hödicke is more convincing.

He isn't alone in looking better in reproduction than in actuality. The catalogue illustrations, on glossy paper, have none of the lifeless, scrubbed quality of the paintings, and the reduction in size usually helps enormously. A colleague of mine claims that the reproductions look better than the pictures because we can imagine them as being different than the pictures really are, but I believe the benefit of reducing the images in "Refigured Painting" is absolute, not relative. Most of the paintings in the exhibition are simply too large for their load of visual and emotional content, which I suppose is just another way of saying that they aren't very good.

Critical reaction to "Refigured Painting" has been almost uniformly negative. Descriptions have ranged from "ghastly" to "near disaster" to "I can't remember a worse museum show." Critics have taken exception to the after-the-factness of doing such a show in the first place and to the "*arrogant* badness" of the result. Krens has been faulted for ignoring existing scholarship in the field of contemporary German art, for distorting the character of the Guggenheim's rotunda, and for failing to add any fresh insight to what we already know about the artists in the exhibition who, by this time, are familiar to most informed viewers. It's all true. One of my more acerbic colleagues has suggested, not altogether facetiously, that the selection of works in "Refigured Painting" was made by computer. Given Krens's avowed fondness for technology, it's as plausible an explanation as any.

A few notable statistics. Large as the Guggenheim exhibition is, it did not include the full complement of works listed and reproduced in the catalogue. They will be seen elsewhere. In light of what Hans Peters told me about his struggle for Salome's inclusion, it seems interesting that only one of Salome's equivocal self-portraits actually made it into the Guggenheim; three are listed. Of the one hundred and seventy-nine works listed in the catalogue, twenty-four come courtesy of a single gallery in Düsseldorf and a comparable number courtesy of the Mary Boone and Michael Werner Gallery and its clients. This, too, is interesting, particularly since a group of thirty-odd Cologne art dealers and many artists are currently engaged in a public struggle against "the intermingling of pseudo-art historical and certain market interests" in an exhibition of contemporary art organized under the auspices of the Ludwig Museum. One possible bright note. Of the forty-one artists in "Refigured Painting," four are women. (Salome is in a special category.) Given the more usual statistic of zero female artists in recent European exhibitions, even this small number constitutes some improvement.

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Architecture

A Stirling performance at Cornell

by Roger Kimball

While one can come up with the names of a few architects who are better known to the general public, it is difficult indeed to think of one who has enjoyed the blessings of critical opinion more uninterruptedly than the sixty-three-year-old British architect James Stirling. "The very best architect of his generation," the critic Charles Jencks wrote in 1973, well before Stirling had embarked on what have come to be regarded as his signature buildings. Ada Louise Huxtable, the former architecture critic for *The New York Times*, went even further, describing Stirling as "one of the great architectural talents of the 20th century." And while there have been scattered dissenting voices—especially in England—they have only added to Stirling's reputation, much as attracting the right enemies often adds more luster to one's name than all the well-meaning exertions of one's friends. The predictable harvest of such continuous attention has been not only numerous commissions but also honors aplenty, including the Gold Medal of the Royal Institute of British Architects, which Stirling was awarded in 1980, and the much-coveted Pritzker Prize, which he won in 1981. In the last few years, at least since his Neue Stattsgalerie in Stuttgart was completed in 1983, Stirling has basked in a reputation so impeccable that it seems almost posthumous. The opening of his new performing arts center at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, reminds us that James Stirling is still very much with us, however, and provides an apt occasion to pause for another look at his work.

The son of a marine engineer, Stirling was born in Glasgow and raised in Liverpool, where he went to architecture school after serving briefly in the Second World War. Though for several years his commissions were few and far between, by the late Fifties he had emerged as an articulate and energetic crusader for a species of imported hi-tech modernism. Projects like his Ham Common Flats in Surrey (completed in 1958) and his Engineering Building at the University of Leicester (1963), undertaken with his then-partner James Cowan, effectively established Stirling's critical reputation; his notorious History Building at Cambridge University (1968) and Queen's College at Oxford (1971), both of which he designed after splitting from Cowan, helped to consolidate it.

Stirling's early buildings possess a brash, often aggressive quality that one critic—searching, one gathers, for an adjective to express both admiration and alarm—described as "bloody-minded." (The massive maintenance problems that plague many of Stirling's buildings from the Sixties have perhaps led some of his English clients to settle simply for "bloody.") Bristling with severe angles, piling up volumes in unexpected fashion, making ingenious use of industrial materials and finishes, they are highly self-conscious progeny of Corbusier's

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beton brut architecture, as, for example, in his Maisons Jaoul and Unité d'Habitation. Accordingly, the influential critic Colin Rowe, Stirling's longtime friend and early champion, has dubbed Stirling's 1960s Brutalist style architecture "Anglo-Corbu."

Since 1971, Stirling has worked in partnership with Michael Wilford, and it is with Wilford, twelve years his junior, that he has negotiated the transformation from talented practitioner to international superstar. Though the idiosyncrasies of Stirling's architecture have always made conventional labels difficult, it may also be said that it is with Michael Wilford that he has managed the transformation from eccentric modernist to confirmed postmodernist. The buildings that have been most commented on and celebrated in the United States—notably the Sackler Museum addition to the Fogg Museum at Harvard University (1984), the Clore Gallery at the Tate Museum in London (1984), and the Neue Stattsgalerie in Stuttgart—are prime examples of the new, more fanciful Stirling: highly inventive, but also, at least for this observer, highly problematic.

There are, first of all, the garish colors: the abundant use of Pepto-Bismol pink and bright, acid greens—what, after its use in many of his recent buildings, might now be baptized "Stirling green." Then there are the coy historical references, so prominent a part of the postmodernist's building kit, that Stirling and his associates sprinkle gratuitously and cleverly throughout their buildings: a quotation from Corbusier here, an mock Italianate feature there, all neatly juxtaposed within—or on top of—a slickly engineered modernist frame. Above all there is Stirling's play with a building's volumes, his highly original but often arbitrary arrangement of shapes, façades, entrances, windows, and so on.

In some ways this knowing free play is the greatest source of Stirling's appeal. It is perhaps what Ada Louise Huxtable pointed to when, in her panegyric to the Sackler Museum, she concluded that "this is not easy architecture. And it is not innocent architecture. It is knowledgeable, worldly, elitist, difficult, and even quirky architecture. The emphasis is on myth and monumentality rather than the old partnership of form and function." But by shifting his attention away from that "old partnership" of form and function—if that is in fact what he is doing in his recent buildings—Stirling also threatens to render his architecture rootless and merely idiosyncratic. The "quirky" quality that Mrs. Huxtable admires can quickly pall when it is pursued for its own sake, as it often is in Stirling's buildings. It tends to result in an architecture that, for all its originality, seems insubstantial and, finally, somewhat frivolous. One suspects that this is part of what Colin Rowe meant when, in the midst of sly praise, he made the "not entirely minor qualification" that Stirling's widely admired Stuttgart museum was "a building with *no* face."[1]

It cannot be said that Stirling and his colleagues (including architects from the New York firm of Wank, Adams, Slavin Associates, with whom they worked on the project), have departed in any significant way from this commitment to cleverness in their new building for Cornell. Although Stirling's office began working on designs for the project in 1982, the building did not open officially until this April, when the finishing touches were completed and Cornell inaugurated the center with a celebration for the many alumni and other donors who paid for it all.

According to university officials, the entire cost of constructing and furnishing the building—approximately twenty-five million dollars—was contributed by "friends" of the project. This generosity is doubly memorialized at the performing arts center. First, the donors are prominently listed in orange and white raised lettering high on a wall of the entrance corridor. The

1 *James Stirling: Buildings and Projects*, edited by Peter Arnell and Ted Bickford, with an introduction by Colin Rowe; Rizzoli, 1984, page 23.

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architects apparently took considerable pains to get the design of this honor roll just right, which is no doubt why they choose to call it a "frieze" instead of, well, instead of merely a *list*. Then there are the scores upon scores of tags affixed to walls, railings, seats, etc., declaring, for instance, that one is standing in the Herbert Gussman and Roseline Nadel Gussman Lobby or has just stepped out onto the Benton M. Kaneb Loggia. This concession to vanity has been commonplace in certain museums for quite a while now; it seems a bit excessive to find it so much in evidence in what is, after all, a college building.

The performing arts center is situated just outside the main campus of Cornell in Collegetown, a quickly gentrifying community that services the university and provides housing for thousands of Cornell students. (Most undergraduates live off-campus after their freshman year.) Occupying a narrow strip of land along College Avenue, the center stands in front of the university's oldest building, Cascadilla Hall, and directly adjacent to Cascadilla Gorge, the breathtaking one-hundred-forty-foot-deep fissure that marks this edge of the Cornell campus. Though the building runs along the main drag of College Avenue, its primary entrance faces the gorge. Consequently, the only clear approach to the center runs effectively toward the building's side, which the architects have done their best to dress up. While less prominent parts of the building are clad in stucco, the College Avenue face is bedecked with rough-cut Vermont marble. These thin, grey-white marble panes are affixed to their concrete supports with stainless-steel clips instead of grout and mortar, using the same open-joint system the architects used in cladding the Neue Stattsgalerie. Also enlivening this side of the building is a small, free-standing, marble-clad octagonal pavilion with porthole windows perched atop rounded arches. The pavilion is intended to be used primarily as an information center and bus stop, though it also houses a small suite of offices for travelling theater groups on its second story.

In Ithaca, the initial reaction to the Stirling design was mixed, ranging from jubilant to hostile. By the time the building opened, critical voices seemed to have quieted down to a murmur, though it is difficult to say whether this was the result of resignation or a change of heart. In any event, it is difficult to describe the style of the performing arts center, primarily because, like so many of Stirling's buildings, it does not *possess* a style so much as it parodies several. Still, it is clear enough that the architecture of Renaissance Siena and Florence were much on Stirling's mind when he set about designing this building. Though structurally it is a perfectly ordinary steel-frame building with concrete decks, the architects have been careful to imbue the building with all manner of Italianate hints and reminiscences. Thus we have a partly enclosed "loggia" running along the side of the building facing the gorge, a simple "pergola" of redwood resting on marble-clad concrete columns rising fifteen feet or so above a "plaza" (which a more pedestrian taste might describe as a simple open space). There is also the neatly designed pitched roof jutting out toward College Avenue, which is surmounted by a slender tower—or "campanile," if you prefer—replete with rounded open arches. Together they are presumably meant to remind us, stationed here, far above Cayuga's waters, of life in an Italian village.

Indeed, in a presentation to the donors on opening night, Stirling noted that he had been sitting in a café across the street from the center one day and chanced to witness a prospective student regard the building for a moment and then tell his family that it was apparently "some sort of Florentine ripoff"—"which I took to be some sort of compliment," Stirling modestly told us. Not that all the building's details are pseudo-Italianate. Some are out-and-out postmodernist pastiche. Set into the marble face of its College Avenue side, for example, is a half-moon of stucco that caps a triangular "bow" window that juts out from the center's main dance studio over the plaza.

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And one can hardly fail to mention the debut of a new green in this building—new to Stirling's palette, anyway—which is applied generously to metal supports: somewhat darker (though perhaps not any more appetizing) than the green used in the Clore Gallery, the Sackler Museum, or the Neue Stattsgalerie, it has been dubbed "Cayuga green" by the architects, in honor of Ithaca's famous Finger Lake.

The interior of the center is bisected by a large multi-story foyer that opens out onto the loggia. Off either side of the foyer are classrooms, studios, theaters, rehearsal spaces, offices, and workshops. Altogether the center contains ten auditoriums and studios for dance and theater. Unfortunately, as soon as one goes beyond the loggia into the guts of the building, the impression of unencumbered order dissolves and one is confronted with a labyrinthine warren of doors and hallways. The internal confusion of the building is lamentable but was probably unavoidable given Cornell's specifications and the modest size of the site: the footprint of the building is only about one hundred thousand square feet. Several studios are literally piled on top of one another; at the same time, the need for sound and light insulation meant that all the entrances to studios, theaters, and rehearsal spaces required double doors.

The chief attraction— and the main public space of the center—is a 5,500 square-foot horseshoe proscenium theater that seats about four hundred fifty people. The architects clearly lavished considerable care on the design and appointment of the theater, which, despite a certain preciousness—especially in the use of purple, green, and pastel pinks—is undoubtedly the most impressive space in the building. The brass railings and oak veneer paneling are handsome and illustrate how well Stirling can adapt off-the-shelf materials and fixtures; elegant supporting columns, swelling slightly at the top, recall the mushroom columns in the Neue Stattsgalerie and their ultimate precursor, the columns Frank Lloyd Wright designed for the Johnson Wax Building. The theater is comfortable, intimate without being close, its lighting is subtle, its acoustics good. Overall, it shows Stirling at his best and least pretentious.

Cornell has provided an elaborate rationale for almost everything having to do with its new performing arts center. Its siting in Collegetown was an effort to improve town-gown relations and "upgrade" the neighborhood; its decision to accommodate only the film, theater arts, and dance departments in the building, leaving the other arts to fend for themselves elsewhere on campus, was a result of space and budget constraints; its selection of Stirling as the building's architect was . . . actually, that was one thing that was never adequately explained. It that was stressed again and again, however, that the center was meant neither to train aspiring actors or dancers nor to serve as a venue for "trial runs" of performances, but rather to offer undergraduates a taste of the worlds and disciplines of theater and dance. Bruce Levitt, the chairman of the theater arts department, even spoke of an effort to "unite the academic with the aesthetic." Since only about eight hundred students out of an undergraduate population of about 12,500 currently take classes at the center, this effort at unification would seem to have some distance to go.

Yet perhaps the announcement that the center would play host to a "multi-cultural celebration" for ten days next fall gave one a deeper insight into the sort of "teaching activities" Cornell envisions for its new center. Asked about the nature of this forthcoming celebration, Mr. Levitt explained that it was to be a celebration of American "differences" and "diversity" predicated on the charming thought that the image of America as a "melting pot" is all wrong and should be replaced by the image of a "gumbo": a kind of stew, you understand, in which things are not assimilated but maintain their "differences." A schedule of events was not yet available for this sideshow, but one can hazard that it will include much talk of racism, sexism,

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ethnicity, and other such topics central to the teaching of the dance and theater.

The multi-cultural celebration notwithstanding, though, the real question remains: What, beyond some postmodernist window-dressing and the prestige of having commissioned a building by James Stirling, did Cornell think it was getting with its new performing arts center? Why spend twenty-five million dollars on what is supposed to be a building full of classrooms, rehearsal spaces, and studios for undergraduates? It is all very mysterious—unless, of course, the window-dressing and prestige are not accoutrements but are themselves the main point of the exercise.

Kindness prevents me from lingering over the smorgasbord of performances to which Cornell students and some of their teachers treated the building's donors one night in April. Perhaps the evening's entertainment helped to explain why university officials might have thought their students needed instruction in dance and theater; but it left one bemused about why they believed such obviously expensive instruction was justified. In any case, by far the most engaging performance was given by Stirling himself. Cornell is famous among architects as a difficult client, and it was most amusing to witness Stirling obliquely reminding his audience of that fact. In the course of his speech, he often adverted to the budgetary constraints that he and his colleagues had labored under in designing and constructing the performing arts center. One result of these constraints was that two sides of the building were left in unornamented stucco, a striking and not altogether agreeable contrast to the marble face of the main College Avenue façade and to the loggia. With what one might think brutal honesty, Stirling went on to describe the center as a building with a front side, a side side, and two back sides. It was impossible to disagree.

As a possible remedy to this situation, Stirling suggested that one day Cornell might engage the artist Richard Haas to paint one of his famous *trompe-l'oeil* murals on one of the "back side" sides. But instead of endowing the blank wall with elaborately painted "windows," "rustication," "pediment," and other *trompe-l'oeil* architectural ornamentation as is his wont, Haas should be commissioned to depict the beautiful natural vista that was visible off College Avenue before the performing arts center was erected. Having just sat through a few dreadfully acted theatrical scenes, some really embarrassing vocal pieces, an insipid modern dance, as well as several self-congratulatory speeches by university officials, I had to admit that it seemed like a good idea. Not that Haas's imagined mural would really do anything to repair the damage, of course, but it might well serve as an admonition—the moral being *caveat emptor.*

Editor's note: Readers are reminded that *The New Criterion* does not publish during July or August. Our next issue will appear in September.

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Books

Yeats revisited

by C. H. Sisson

Richard J. Finneran's revised edition of the poems of W. B. Yeats is the first volume of a fourteen-volume series that will include Yeats's plays, essays, and autobiographies.[1] It could not have appeared at a better time. Fifty is a dangerous age for a dead man's reputation. The fame of a lifetime has had time to fade, and the echoes are more likely to give an impression of distance than of the enthusiasm which first gave rise to it. The weakening of the echoes is progressive. In 1942, three years after Yeats's death, Allen Tate could still speak of "a poetry which . . . is nearer the center of our main traditions of sensibility and thought than the poetry of Eliot and Pound." I suppose that was a bold thought for the time, from a man of an age to have received the first impact not only of Yeats's later work but of the main oeuvre of Pound and Eliot. At the same time Tate delivered himself of a grim foreboding: "the study of Yeats in the coming generation is likely to overdo the scholarly procedure, and the result will be the occultation of [the] poetry." It could be argued that he was right about the scholarly procedures. Was he also right about the occultation? Or, as Eliot and Pound themselves hurry into the past, does their work seem in no less danger of losing touch with the "sensibility and thought" of the immediate future?

Yeats was born in 1865, the year in which the American Civil War ended and in which Swinburne, still only in his late twenties, published *Atalanta in Calydon*. Those events smell of a past already remote when, in 1936, Yeats said in the introduction to his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, "I have tried to be modern"—a claim to which the contents of that muddled volume gave, even then, a certain pathos. He was, after all, an older contemporary of William Vaughn Moody and of Edwin Arlington Robinson, and had outlived them both. A septuagenarian, however brilliant a performer he has been or still is, is not the best person to edit an anthology designed to give a view of the preceding three decades. It would be absurd to judge Yeats's "modernity" in terms of his work as an anthologist; in the *New Poems*, published by the Cuala Press in 1938 and reproduced in the posthumous *Last Poems* (1940), he still spoke with authority. It is on the "later Yeats" as a whole (however you reckon that period) that any claim to count the poet with Eliot and Pound as a "modern" must rest. However that may be, those three are the three major poets of the English language in the first half of the twentieth century—two Americans, one Irishman. No Englishman: Hardy, born in 1840, can hardly be considered of the period.

The perspective of Eliot and Pound on Yeats suggests that they felt the gap between the generation of the 1880s, to which they belonged, and that of the 1860s, which was

1 *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats, Volume 1: The Poems*, edited by Richard J. Finneran; Macmillan, 751 pages, $32.50.

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Yeats's. Eliot summed up his attitude in 1934 with the remark that "Yeats has arrived at greatness against the greatest odds," and illustrated what he meant by citing, as the *terminus ad quem* the older poet had arrived, lines from *The Winding Stair*:

> Things said or done long years ago,
> Or things I did not do or say
> But thought that I might say or do,
> Weigh me down, and not a day
> But something is recalled,
> My conscience or my vanity appalled.

Eliot's criticism implies a sense of Yeats's long haul from his early romanticism. Pound's relations with Yeats were more complicated. From the other side of the Atlantic he recognized the older poet as the one technical master then at large in London. When he arrived he found that there were two, the other being Ford Madox Hueffer, and it was the latter, certainly, who taught him more about the undesirability of "cream puffs." Later there came a time when Yeats was learning from Pound, an unusual reversal of roles between the generations. In the intervening period (in 1918) Pound could write to Margaret C. Anderson as if Yeats had failed him: "And I desire also to resurrect the art of the lyric, I mean words to be sung, for Yeats's only wail and submit to keening and ch*aun*ting (with a u)." Pound was right to see that Yeats's was a cloudy and impure music as compared with that of Waller or Campion.

The uneasiness the generation of the 1880s felt about Yeats is well illustrated, one might almost say summed up, in the notice Wyndham Lewis wrote for *New Verse* on the occasion of Yeats's death. Lewis had felt reluctant to write, but Yeats had spoken up for *Childermass* and no doubt he felt under a moral constraint. "It has the appearance of hitting a man when he is down to jump in and say anything short of praise in such a case," he said, and praise he did: "The writing of a faultless lyric is such an achievement that I could leave it at that. But everyone knows that he has written a few lyrics of consummate beauty." He concluded:

> Yeats has given me a sort of kick: a kind of soft, dreamy kick. I am obliged to him. I am certain he will live. He will live to give many as yet unborn a kick like the kick he gave me. An authentic kick. I am *for* this particular ghost. And this will, I believe, be a unanimous verdict.

It is as if the "later Yeats" had not got through to him, or had not been believed. That is the attitude of a generation, more or less, and leaves Eliot's diagnosis as the best that, in the end, they could say for him.

New Verse itself, which represented Auden and his generation, was no more sympathetic, and was more strident. The editorial note introducing Lewis's obituary began with "The poeticising period is over" and went on to deride a tribute the then poet laureate (John Masefield) had paid to the great poet. That functionary had remarked that "the most poetical figure of this time has passed from us." The editorial comment on this judgment was sharp; it was "an ambiguity, which is in one sense more true no doubt than it was intended to be. We have probably been exaggerating the value of Yeats." Clearly, nothing was to stand in the way of the seizure of power by those whose voices had broken more recently.

This was the atmosphere in which I came to my first serious reading of Yeats. I put it like that because I had, of course, already come across the pieces then most anthologized, such as "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" and, as a boy absorbed by Keats and even by Rossetti, I must have read them with delectation. But at the age of seventeen I had encountered the work of Eliot, and shortly afterward that of Pound, and all that had immediately preceded them was swept away. It was only after this radical re-education, and indeed after indoctrination by *New Verse*, that I came to the *Collected Poems* of Yeats—well instructed enough, therefore, to know that I should start reading from *The Winding Stair* and *The Tower*. I looked once or twice

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without effect, and then the magic began. However fashionable my theoretical literary dogmatisms may have been at the time, the poems worked. The clarity and the emphasis of the language were such that the words went home to my memory, and what used to be called the heart, so that I have never since been able to return to Yeats without being threatened by a recrudescence—at times sharply resisted—of that early enthusiasm. The impressions of youth are indelible, and when I open the book now the words rise less from the page than from within me.

The poems—strangely, I now think—did not affect the adolescent verses I occasionally wrote at that period; the influences were those of Eliot, Pound, and finally Auden. It was their too evident presence that made me give up writing verse at the age of twenty. When, nearly nine years later and in circumstances determined by the war, I started again, and began intermittently writing my grown-up poems, literary influences were not what occupied my mind. The risk of fresh contemporary contagion had really disappeared by 1940, when I found myself regarding Eliot's final phase with skepticism.

If I have given what may seem undue attention to the attitudes of generations dead or dying in what is supposed to be an essay on Yeats himself, it is because I am acutely conscious that, like the poet, the reader and the critic have their own subjectivities, and that these are nowhere more obstructive than when one is speaking of a poet whose life span overlaps one's own. In this connection one should perhaps say something about the Irishness of Yeats since, if it has properly a relatively small part in the vast bulk of scholarship concerned with his work, it was of vast importance to him and can hardly have been irrelevant to the currency of his poems among American readers.

It would have been an odd English reader, in the Thirties, who gave the matter much thought. The Celtic twilight had gone out, or flickered over the early poems merely to give a touch of local color. Nobody at that time cared what MacDonagh's bony thumb had been doing in 1916, and the settlement of 1922 was completely indifferent, one might say, to the English public at large and certainly to the young. After all, the settlement was bland, as far as England was concerned, and its effects were simply invisible. The Irish came and went as they still do and as they had always done. A certain obtuseness on the part of the English has to be allowed for. In any case, the politics which raged among students in those days were hardly concerned with national matters, except in relation to Germany. What mattered about Yeats was the literary question of what one might call his possible modernity; he appeared to have left the Celtic twilight for something like the brilliant daylight we imagined we were living in. No attention was paid—and very little has been paid since—to the fact that Yeats's early attachment to O'Leary had developed, by way of a liking for great Anglo-Irish houses and rather absurd claims for the intellect and for fine manners, to a contempt of the mob, and to the sort of fascist sympathies which led Pound to the wrong side in the war. O'Leary himself was of a different stamp. He had said in the 1890s:

> I hold still . . . that all agitating movements, however inevitable and necessary they may be, are at best but a necessary evil, involving all forms of self-seeking and insincerity, accompanied with outrage and violence, and opening up the widest field for the exercise of that treachery and violence which lies latent in human nature.

It was not only "Romantic Ireland" that was "with O'Leary in the grave" but a certain moral lucidity. Yeats perhaps admired "ranting, roaring oppressors," as Dorothy Wellesley said he did. Conor Cruise O'Brien, whose essay on Yeats's politics is a remarkably well-informed guide to the subject, comments that, had Yeats survived, and had the war gone

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differently, "one would have expected to see him at least a cautious participant, or ornament, in a collaborationist regime." O'Brien then concludes:

> It is probably fortunate for his future reputation . . . that he died in January, 1939 before the political momentum of his last years could carry him any farther than *On the Boiler* [his last collection of essays].

Pound's reputation has survived, if not altogether undamaged, from even less pardonable wrongheadedness, and certainly such considerations do not trouble me now. When I re-read Yeats, it is only from my own literary past that I fear obfuscation, because those first readings remain so vivid. Yet I find I am not tempted to make the sharp distinction between the early and the later Yeats which was so fashionable in my time. The whole oeuvre seems to flow from its roots like a tree. *Crossways*, the volume of 1889, contains elements, even habits of form, which were still with Yeats in the Thirties, and without which the chastened language of the later period would not have its full effect. Consider "The Stolen Child," with its refrain:

> Come away, O human child!
> To the waters and the wild
> With a faery, hand in hand,
> For the world's more full of weeping than
> you can understand.

Yeats's later taste, and you might say the general change of fashion, would have removed the "faery." The tone of his work had lost that dreaminess and become that of "the finished man among his enemies." Yet not only the use of a refrain, but the singing line of the early poem, tightened and honed, is clearly recognizable in

> "I am of Ireland,
> And the Holy Land of Ireland,
> And time runs on," cried she.
> "Come out of charity,
> Come dance with me in Ireland."

The later poem is more accomplished, certainly; it is the work of a more practiced hand, but it is the same hand. "The Stolen Child" has merits of a different kind. "Where flapping herons wake/The drowsy water-rats" is the work of someone who has seen a riverbank; one can imagine the young Pound finding a needed clarity there.

Yet the overwhelming impression of the early poems is of a dreaminess that has nothing to do with dreams but exhibits, rather, that relaxation of attention to the outside world which was one of the perils of nineteenth-century romanticism. The words for the most part are sanctioned by a preconceived notion of what is poetical, a different set of words from those which deadened so much of the poetry from the eighteenth century, but still a set. The author has not been touched by Browning or by Clough, who, each in his own way, had been able to write in a language much less affected; but his ability to handle "poetic" matter in his chosen "poetic" style marks him often as a possible, sometimes as an actual, master of his art. The verses are not only in "beautiful" language, they are beautifully managed, and the poems have an inner structure which few in any tradition have controlled so well. It may be that it is easier now for the young to appreciate this, to whom the poems must seem to come from a distant culture, than for the older generation for whom "Innisfree" or "When You Are Old" are so familiar that the ploys they use can hardly be encountered again without a smile. "The Powers whose name and shape no living creature knows" may seem tiresome, but there are moments when Yeats points in their direction with an unexpected vigor. In 1893 no reader—not the author himself—could guess where that vigor would lead.

> Who will go drive with Fergus now,
> And pierce the deep wood's woven shade,
> And dance upon the level shore?
> Young man, lift up your russet brow,
> And lift your tender eyelids, maid,
> And brood on hopes and fears no more.

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> And no more turn aside and brood
> Upon love's bitter mystery;
> For Fergus rules the brazen cars,
> And rules the shadows of the wood,
> And the white breast of the dim sea
> And all dishevelled wandering stars.

The "russet brows" and the "tender eyelids" do not impede the energetic movement of the verse, which is as sure as in the shorter lyrics of *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair*.

Of course, the dreamy young man of these earlier poems is a figure of fun, though no funnier, perhaps, than some literary figures of a later date, including some who now take themselves seriously while posing in a different fashion. In a note to the *Collected Poems,* Yeats, looking back at *Crossways* from a distance of some thirty-five years, and still not entirely seeing the joke, speaks of "the mystical painter Horton . . . writing . . . these words: 'I met your beloved in Russell Square, and she was weeping,' by which he meant that he had seen a vision of my neglected soul." Yeats's notes are printed in the present edition, and Finneran gives his own comments on this one:

> Yeats is apparently recalling a letter of 6 May 1896. . . . Horton wrote of a "vision" he had had of Yeats that morning: "Yeats, naked and gaunt, with long black hair falling back over a face of a deathly whiteness, with eyes that flame but have within them depths of unutterable sadness. He is wearily going on his way following many lights that dance in front and at the side of him. Behind him follows with outstretched arms a lovely girl in long trailing white garments, weeping."

A fine situation for a young man of thirty! one might say. Horton was certainly seeing something behind the poet's dream mask, including a certain self-deception as to the nature of his "soul," and it must be said that, even or especially in the most vigorous of his later poems, the attitudinizing remains, and one is never sure that he knows how much or how little of the truth he is telling.

What happened to Yeats, as he moved through many wonderful performances and much public praise into old age, was that he developed from the skillful use of a predesigned romantic language to a rhetoric the purpose of which seems to have been more to present himself as a striking figure than actually to persuade anyone. No use for him to say, as he did in mid-career, that the "hollow face" of Dante was a mask that the author of the *Commedia* had "fashioned from his opposite," because with Dante it is not himself but what he presents that matters, and his figures are not, like Yeats's "Dying Lady" or "Major Robert Gregory," figures to impress the world but people whose time for impressing the world has passed. We are always on the edge of action with Yeats's most impressive poems. One suspects that the will, if not indeed willfulness, entered into his compositions in a manner not usual with poets; the habit of "writing out first the substance of the verse on which he was working," as F. R. Higgins puts it, is perhaps an indication of this. Yeats sought and found an emphatic clarity of utterance, and the carpentry of his verse was unmatched in his time.

One might still think that the content was always that of a man too uncertain of himself to speak without a certain scheming deliberation. Perhaps this is a question which cannot be resolved except at a distance from the fripperies of the twentieth century. Patrick Kavanagh, forty years Yeats's junior and the son of a small farmer in County Monaghan, saw Yeats's Ireland as "essentially sentimental," "a phoney Ireland . . . eminently suitable for export to America" which "falsified the picture of the country." These things must have a diminishing importance as the past recedes. Meanwhile, the touch of hoax about Yeats's performance has probably limited the depth of his influence on younger poets. Yet a man who did so much to "rid himself of elaboration, of redundancy" (Higgins again) cannot but be a profitable study for anyone with the capacity to learn how to write well. And if, after the liberties and confusions of the last

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fifty years, the problem of writing well-made stanzas is now different from the one which faced a poet emerging from the world of Tennyson and Swinburne, no writer of verse can fail to benefit from a familiarity with Yeats's—in its kind—unsurpassed performance.

Arriving where she started

Barbara Probst Solomon Horse-Trading and Ecstasy. North Point Press, 255 pages, $18.95

reviewed by David Klinghoffer

Barbara Probst Solomon has fueled an entire career on what one might call retroliberal nostalgia. A diverse group, retroliberals range from editors of *The New Republic*, that stronghold of Fifties liberalism, through the bow-tied, Trumanesque presidential candidate Paul Simon, and on to any number of tweedy university types. Though ununited by any specific creed, retroliberals share a common pride in their independence from the current liberal establishment, along with a common distrust for the New Left and its offshoots, from Jesse Jackson to deconstruction, and an equal distaste for anything that sounds at all like conservatism. They also share a general nostalgia for the intellectual and political world that sprang up among deserters from the Stalinist Old Left during the mid-1930s—with the founding of *Partisan Review*—and continued through the late 1950s, when the dreaded New Left made its first appearances. During the past few years alone, this nostalgia has produced half a dozen critical but extremely affectionate studies and memoirs of the period. Most recently, in *The Last Intellectuals* (1987), Russell Jacoby has lamented that, with the rapid extinction of the non-academic intellectual since the 1950s, giants have ceased to appear in the earth.

Beginning with the publication of her first book—*The Beat of Life* (1960), a novel about Columbia students during the Beat era—Barbara Probst Solomon has devoted herself more or less full-time to the project of looking back wistfully on the Forties and Fifties. In *Arriving Where We Started* (1972), a fictionalized memoir, she recalls her life in Paris during the years after World War II, her involvement with members of the anti-Franco Spanish resistance, and her return to the New York intellectual scene of the early 1950s. In a second volume of memoirs, *Short Flights* (1983), she concentrates on the Spain of the 1970s, but remains glued to the subject that, as much as any, set blood pressure spiraling among the old liberals: the Republic, the Civil War, Franco, the Resistance.

The mainstay of her career, however, has been journalism, samples of which are now collected in *Horse-Trading and Ecstasy*. In interviews, essays, and book reviews written between 1959 and 1988 for *The New York Review of Books*, *The New Republic*, *The Village Voice*, *Socialist Commentary*, *Partisan Review*, *Dissent*, and the Spanish newsweekly *Cambio 16*, Mrs. Solomon reveals the mind behind her backward-looking fiction to be that of a great, lumbering dinosaur of retroliberalism. Wading through a swamp of political and intellectual concerns associated with the 1940s and 1950s, she chews meditatively on such subjects as the Nazi occupation of France, the French Resistance, fascist Spain, Hemingway, the Beat generation, New York intellectuals, Dwight Macdonald, Jack Kerouac, James Baldwin, Norman Mailer, the Trillings. Along the way she exhibits certain retroliberal ticks—including most notably her frequent giveaway references to "old liberals" and "independent liberals." Mrs. Solomon admires the "old, liberal enclave" in San Antonio, Texas; representatives of the "independent Left" in occupied Paris; the "independent leftist" in the French novelist Claude Simon. Her own family, she says, was "independent-minded." What "independent" liberalism means, in her case, at least, is a queasiness in the presence of forthright leftism combined with a strong disinclination to renounce leftism altogether. Like the rebellious son who

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denounces his father as a class enemy while continuing to draw a generous allowance, the independent-minded Mrs. Solomon takes frequent issue with the canon of standard-issue left-wing views, while nevertheless associating herself with magazines like *Dissent* and *Socialist Commentary*.

As a journalist, when writing about non-literary subjects, she sometimes rises above the pedestrian level of "on the scene" news analysis. "Days and Nights in Texas" recalls through quirky, charming details a sojourn the Solomon family took during the Sixties among that state's "old liberals." The collection also includes a genuinely painful essay on being youngish and living in New York. In her best work, most of it from the early Sixties, we hear a wry, vital, and distinctly female voice—a voice that sounds more than a little like Joan Didion, who was writing similarly personal, familiar essays during the same period. In fact, many of the subjects Mrs. Solomon has chosen for her best essays—the Ginny Foat and Jean Harris cases, rich Texas liberals, faculty ennui at SUNY Buffalo in 1968—sound like subjects that might have interested Miss Didion.

The humor and insightfulness of these pieces evaporate entirely when Mrs. Solomon turns to explore her decidedly dated tastes in literature—a subject to which roughly half of *Horse-Trading and Ecstasy* is dedicated. The book's first sentence, from an essay on Marguerite Duras, declares with retroliberal relish the death of those "grand *monstres* of French literary culture": Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan. "Marxism and the *nouveau roman*," too, she exults, have "almost inevitably lost their former luster. French literary vedettes like Philippe Sollers and Nathalie Sarraute have jumped ship and are writing highly accessible autobiographical novels." Other isolated lines ("Literature is art and must be treated that way," she says elsewhere) might likewise lead one to expect not only that Mrs. Solomon nurtures a healthy distrust for current literary chic, but that, in her, we might find a reader sensitive to literature as an aesthetic experience—an old left-winger on her way home to the rigorous standards of high modernism advocated by the old *Partisan Review*.

Anyone picking up *Horse-Trading and Ecstasy* with such an expectation will be extremely disappointed. To begin with, about half of Mrs. Solomon's literary criticism consists of plot summary. The book's title piece is a book review summarizing the plot of *Dear Diego*, an "extraordinary" novella by the Mexican novelist Elena Poniatowska. Mrs. Solomon helpfully includes a single sentence of evaluation: "The novella is appealing because Poniatowska is so good at capturing the sadness of third-rate French hotels, the wet Paris fog, and the *cafard* so familiar to bohemians long on soul and short on cash."

The other half of Mrs. Solomon's criticism seeks in literature the continuation of political and moral discourse by other means. Susan Sontag has written that the "pioneering forces of modern sensibility" have been homosexual aestheticism and irony and Jewish moral seriousness. The latter, applied crudely to the subject of literature, is on prominent display in *Horse-Trading and Ecstasy*. For Mrs. Solomon, the world of fiction is an enormous hunting ground for racists and Nazis.

The salient point to be made about Marguerite Duras's *L'Amant*, for example, is that the novel is unfair to Asians. "Why," she demands, "are the Chinese, the locals, the Indians always perceived as the bad guys with the money?" Of Gregor Von Rezzori's novel *The Death of My Brother Abel*, she says: "The most troubling part of *Abel* is Von Rezzori's description of the Nuremberg trials as a failure and 'claptrap.'" In an interview with Rezzori, she is determined to get his opinion on the death camps. Does he agree they were evil or not? she insists. An entire literary form, the *nouveau roman*, comes under attack because its "anti-historic stance and rarefied prose" have allowed French writers to gloss over the issue of French collaboration under the Nazi occupation—allowing Alain Robbe-Grillet, for one, to write an "oddly jolly" memoir,

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Le Miroir Qui Revient, excusing his family for believing that "Jews threatened to destroy the old Europe and create social and political disorder," that the Nazis "represented order, decency, and a chance for a united Europe." And poor Jack Kerouac! In Mrs. Solomon's opinion, "Once the Kerouacian sentimentality is scraped away, [Kerouac is] like a stream-of-consciousness blood brother of *Mein Kampf*." This is an all-too-characteristic example of Mrs. Solomon's critical hyperbole.

Let it suffice to say that, like so many readers today, Mrs. Solomon seems dead to literature as an aesthetic experience, absolutely uninterested in language as a form of art. And so she directs our attention to artists in what she perceives to be their primary role as spokesman for moral and political positions.

Of course one needn't look far these days to find artists altogether delighted to assume just such a pose. E. L. Doctorow and Norman Mailer (an old friend of Mrs. Solomon's, as her readers are frequently reminded) made the front page of the *Times* recently, congratulating themselves on having the moral courage to harangue the Ayatollah in the perilously exposed setting of a downtown lecture hall. And Günter Grass, John Irving, and Joyce Carol Oates made the pages of *Cambio 16* (Barbara Probst Solomon, reporter) when they gathered at a New School forum to discuss their writing—only to end up squabbling over U.S. foreign policy in Argentina. Not just in Mrs. Solomon's book, but in every venue, our writers find it increasingly difficult to distinguish between the profession of literature and the profession of politics—perhaps because as writers of literature they have so little to say that isn't political. For anyone interested in seeing how naturally the retroliberal politics of "independence" mesh with this inability to think about literature independent of politics, Mrs. Solomon's book can be recommended.

At the intersection of art and life

Robert Pinsky Poetry and the World. The Ecco Press, 193 pages, $19.95

Seamus Heaney The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose 1978-1987. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 170 pages, $17.95

reviewed by Robert Richman

These two collections of critical essays are by writers whose principal work is poetry. Robert Pinsky, who was born in 1940 in Long Branch, New Jersey, has written three full-length books of verse. Seamus Heaney, who was born in 1939 in County Derry, Ireland, has written eight. As one might expect, nearly all of the pieces in these two volumes are devoted to poetry. Heaney's subjects include the verse of W. H. Auden, Philip Larkin, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Osip Mandelstam; Pinsky offers essays on William Carlos Williams, Elizabeth Bishop, Marianne Moore, George Oppen, and Seamus Heaney. Pinsky's book also contains a few memoir-essays, which, like those in *Preoccupations* (1980), Seamus Heaney's earlier collection of critical essays, enlarge upon the poet's critical position. What unites Heaney and Pinsky as critics is an overriding concern with the relationship between art and life.

There is a distinct critical ambivalence running through Pinsky's book, and it is perhaps best seen in the title essay. In this piece, Pinsky contrasts imaginative literature, which offers "a kind of metaphysical . . . hope, a sense of possibility" with our experience of the world, which tends to deny such hope. (The phrase "a kind of metaphysical hope, a sense of possibility" is used to describe an Isaac Babel story, "An Evening at the Empress's," but Pinsky has it stand for the metaphysical potentialities of all

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literature.) Acknowledging both despair and hope—hope understood here as the desire to persist in the face of calamities—is crucial for Pinsky. He argues that, in poetry especially, the attempt to go beyond worldly circumstances is less effective without the presence, in the poem, of some gritty reality; but any reflection of the world's harshness that lacks an imaginative sense of possibility will lose some of its force. Hence Pinsky's admiration for the note of hope in a Babel story that takes place during the Russian Revolution; and his approval of Elizabeth Bishop's poetry, in which he perceives an acknowledgement of the "urgencies of the communal [i.e., worldly] realm."

This dual outlook is nothing new for Pinsky. One focus of his 1976 study, *The Situation of Poetry*, was what he described in that book as "the place of the human imagination in a world unlike itself." The ambivalence that marks this early book is often the result of the paradoxical desire to honor the imagination (which can distort reality) and the world (which can muzzle the imagination). Thus, after making a case for a verse of unironic, unambiguous statement (spoken *truly*, i.e., from the heart), Pinsky asserts: "One need not reject all poems which are dramatic and figurative in conception in order to admire [confessional poems] for its being personal and literal."

A similar ambiguity can be discerned in much of Pinsky's own poetry, which is collected in *Sadness and Happiness* (1975), *An Explanation of America* (1979), and *History of My Heart* (1984). Though in *The Situation of Poetry* Pinsky dismisses a poem by Robert Creeley, a disciple of Pound and Williams, for being written in language "so chastened that it seems to aspire to some kind of non-language," some of Pinsky's own poems rely on a similar directness. "A Long Branch Song," for example, from *History of My Heart*, owes much to the spirit of Williams:

> Some days in May, little stars
> Winked all over the ocean. The blue
> Barely changed all morning and afternoon.
> The chimes of the bank's bronze clock;
> The hoarse voice of Cookie, hawking
> *The Daily Record* for thirty-five years.

In presenting this slice of reality, Pinsky allows himself just one metaphor and no symbols. Yet this realistic poem about Pinsky's New Jersey hometown is juxtaposed with the less real, more poetic beauty of the poem "Ralegh's Prizes," which begins: "And Summer turns her head with its dark tangle/ All the way toward us; and the trees are heavy . . . ."

Pinsky's ambivalence is even visible within a single poem. In "Memorial," from *An Explanation of America*, the poet remembers the dead in a series of emotional and intellectual checks and balances:

> (J.E. and N.M.S.)
>
> Here lies a man. And here, a girl. They live
> In the kind of artificial life we give
>
> To birds or statues: imagining what they feel,
> Or that like birds the dead each had one call,
>
> Repeated, or a gesture that suspends
> Their being in a forehead or the hands.
>
> A man comes whistling from a house. The screen
> Snaps shut behind him. Though there is no man
>
> And no house, memory sends him to get tools
> From a familiar shed, and so he strolls
>
> Through summer shade to work on the family car.
> He is my uncle, and fresh home from the war,
>
> With little for me to remember him doing yet.
> The clock of the cancer ticks in his body, or not,
>
> Depending if it is there, or waits. The search
> Of memory gains and fails like surf . . . .

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The poem begins with the fact of death: "Here lies a man. And here, a girl." This blunt statement is immediately qualified, however, by the phrase "They live . . ." at the end of the first line. This shift is itself modified in the next line by a reference to "the kind of artificial life we give." The sense of distance from the dead is reinforced in the next four lines, in which the poet declares that all he can do by way of remembrance is to imagine "what [the dead] feel," or call upon imagery to invoke this imagined feeling, or invent a "gesture that suspends/ Their being in a forehead or the hands." These sentiments leave us with a profound sense of the inadequacy of poetry; and yet there follows an apparently successful appeal to memory: "A man comes whistling from a house." Memory is no sooner invoked, however, than it is revealed to be something of a fraud: ". . . there is no man/And no house . . . . " Despite this, the remembered man is sent "to get tools/From a familiar shed" so he can stroll "[t]hrough summer shade to work on the family car." The poet then identifies the man: "He is my uncle, and fresh home from the war." This emotional peak is quickly deflated by the revelation of another of memory's flaws: that there is in fact "little for me to remember him doing yet." This switch leads to another equivocation: "The clock of the cancer ticks in his body, or not . . . ." The next image is of memory—it "gains and fails like surf"—which is also a metaphor for the poem itself.

Only the first half of "Memorial" has been quoted, but its process of gaining and failing continues to the end. There is a playful spirit here; yet the goal, which is to scrutinize the procedures of both the memory and the intellect, is serious. Such relentless questioning may not be appropriate for all the subjects of poetry, but it seems justified in this case. At any rate, it is not Pinsky's intention to undermine memory or metaphor completely; he simply hopes to show how misleading and presumptive they can be. In *The Situation of Poetry*, apropos some poems by Robert Lowell, Pinsky laments "how the dead possess our remembering, the small good it does them." Pinsky's possession of the dead in "Memorial" doesn't do much for them either; but it does help give shape to the quandary the dead have created for the poet.

Pinsky goes to commendable lengths in *The Situation of Poetry* to strike a balance between the hopeful and despairing (i.e., the imaginative and realistic) aspects of poetry. Near the end of the book, however, he praises the verse of Frank Bidart in a way that almost capsizes such a balanced view. Much of Bidart's poetry is as mortifyingly unpleasant as "realistic" poetry tends to get; it lacks what Pinsky calls, in the title essay of his new book, the requisite "decorum" or "limiting boundary" of the transforming poetic imagination. It would seem that Pinsky has momentarily surrendered to the side of unvarnished realism.

It is interesting in this connection to note that in "T. S. Eliot: A Memoir," from the new book, Pinsky recalls how his youthful mix of submission and resistance to Eliot (Pinsky refers to his early Eliot imitations as "allusive rubbish") has evolved into a solid respect. Pinsky once perceived Eliot as too wrapped up in art, too symbol-choked; what he now admires in Eliot is what he finds so appealing in Bishop and Babel: the attempt to embrace both "the inward and outward life, the life of experience and of some imaginary ideal." Pinsky finds in Eliot's verse "the clangorous, barely-harmonized bringing together of the sacred and the profane." He then continues:

> Because he identified and penetrated this dualism in the rhythms and noises and smells and surfaces of modern life, without simplifying what he saw into false ideas of squalor or perfection, Eliot remains entirely essential for us.

Bidart's poetry is riddled with "false ideas of squalor" even if it looks as if Pinsky is himself nowadays less tempted by it.

This slight but significant shift, from assenting (occasionally) to a poetry of flat

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realism to hardly ever assenting to it, can also be inferred from the essay entitled "Responsibilities of the Poet." Here Pinsky criticizes Frank O'Hara's "Ave Maria," in which O'Hara implores the "Mothers of America" to send their sons to the afternoon movies so that they may be preyed upon by homosexuals lurking in the dark. The poem, Pinsky writes, is "irresponsible," "repugnant," "unacceptable," "regrettable," and a "violation of social boundaries." This is one of the few times in *Poetry and the World* when Pinsky repeats himself, but the repetition is justified, given that in some dark theater of an English department there lurks a deconstructionist who will attempt to defuse O'Hara's poem. The poet's "need to answer [the world] by transforming is primary," Pinsky declares in the same essay. There isn't enough "transforming" of reality in O'Hara's poem; it remains totally hostage to the poet's private fantasy world; it therefore does not succeed as verse.

In a memoir entitled "Salt Water," Pinsky traces his interest in poetry's "dual concern, bodily and conceptual," to his early years in Long Branch. The rupture between poetry and the world that Pinsky would later place at the center of his work was prefigured by the gulf between the inwardly focused boy and the social world around him. Another intimation of this split was to be found in Pinsky's Jewish family, which was characterized by opposites: a certain "cerebral timidity," on the one hand, and the "thuggish swank" of Pinsky's bootlegging, pugilistic grandfather, on the other. In the final essay of the book, "Some Passages of Isaiah," Pinsky also reflects on his grandfather's rough, bawdy appeal, which was tempered by the synagogue's pure "colorless light of observance." Perhaps the most memorable contrast is between the restricting provinciality of the small town and the adventurous possibility of the open sea. Those "dangerous, productive waters," Pinsky writes, suggest "so much of heroic risk or gaudy pleasure that the imagination is nudged by [their] presence in extravagant directions."

These are Pinsky's autobiographical versions of Babel's vision of hope in a world of pain: take away the seedy shore town, after all, and the ocean's appeal is diminished. The same may be said of poetry, the transformations of which are less compelling without a vivid sense of what has been transformed.

And yet it is not only Pinsky's poetry that benefits from an infusion of life; his critical observations benefit as well. His claim to freedom as a poet, in the essay "Form and Freedom," is persuasive in part because the reader is convinced (after reading *Poetry and the World*) that the sentiment is the fruit not only of thought but of lived experience:

> I am claiming that my idea of learned culture in general, and the rhythms of English poetry in particular, as modes of freedom, comes from inside me. I feel convinced that it is not merely or simply an ideology assimilated by the upward-striving, English-speaking descendent of ambitious steerage immigrants from Eastern Europe. Though I know what is meant by "control" in a work of art, and respect the idea, my main response to the idea of control is that it is something external, from which the artist profits by resisting it. Control is not the same as form.

The tension between art and life—between "Song and Suffering," in Seamus Heaney's phrase—is also the central thread in Heaney's latest book of essays, *The Government of the Tongue*. It is tempting to assert that Heaney, who taught at Queens University in Belfast until 1972, comes by his obsession with the life side of the equation ("Suffering") more involuntarily than Pinsky, given the violence Heaney has experienced firsthand. (In a 1971 essay, reprinted in *Preoccupations*, Heaney wrote of how the residents of Belfast "survive explosions and funerals and live on among families of the victims, those blown apart and those in cells apart.") Ironically, however, as willing as Heaney is to admit the inclusion of "Suffering" in poetry, he is

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almost always an equally strong proponent of "Song"—what he calls, in the book's first essay, the "untrammeled," "joyful affirmation of music." He doesn't deny that telling the bitter truth about real events can be of some social use; but he realizes that such acts tend to dull the poet's imagination. Thus, as respectful as Heaney is, in the first essay, of Wilfred Owen's war poetry—he acknowledges its "moral substance"—he seems to be more impressed with Osip Mandelstam's private, symbolical, "self-justifying" poetry. What he especially likes about the kind of poetry Mandelstam wrote is that it is, as Heaney writes in another essay, "its own vindicating force," the expression of which "verif[ies] our singularity . . . [in the face of] the brutality of the historical onslaught."

In only a few of the essays of *The Government of the Tongue* does Heaney state explicitly that poetry is best when left unstained by political rhetoric. For Heaney, politics are not the only enemies of the poetic imagination. They are only the most visible. To write of any of the objects of the world without taking aesthetic control of them and imaginatively transforming them is, for Heaney, to impose a straitjacket on the poet's sensibility. Thus his admiration for the later poems of Patrick Kavanagh is explained by what Heaney calls the "sites where the mind projects its own force." These later poems, he maintains, have a "visionary intent" and "spiritual daring" that distinguish them from Kavanagh's early realistic verse, which, in Heaney's view, lacked the poet's own visionary presence. "What is important," writes Heaney of Kavanagh's later work, "is not so much that the world is there to be celebrated, more that the poet is at hand to proceed with the celebration."

In the essay on Philip Larkin, entitled "The Main of Light," Heaney focuses on that part of the poet's oeuvre—admittedly small—in which Larkin momentarily stops reveling in the meanness of middle-class English life and lets his imagination soar. "[T]here survives in [Larkin]," observes Heaney, in what is no doubt a candidate for one of the best sentences ever written on the poet, "a repining for a more crystalline reality to which he might give allegiance." Similarly, what excites Heaney in Derek Walcott's poetry are those moments when the poet "modulate[s] to the visionary." "The best poems in *The Star-Apple Kingdom*," observes Heaney, "are dream visions; the high moments are hallucinatory, cathartic, redemptive even."

What Heaney rejoices in, in short, is a poet's resistance to a world that continually threatens to smother him with a blanket of ideology and facts—including biographical facts. In the essay called "The Indefatigable Hoof-taps: Sylvia Plath," Heaney remarks that a "poem like 'Daddy'. . . [is] so entangled in biographical circumstances and rampages so permissively in the history of other people's sorrows that it simply overdraws its rights to our sympathy."

But more hazardous than autobiographical facts, perhaps, are political ones. Much of the verse of the Czech poet Miroslav Holub, Heaney remarks, "has in it all the worn-down truth-to-life of the disillusioned man." Yet even this disenchanted, politically saturated writer reserves for himself and his readers those moments when "the kaleidoscopic glamour of chemical process" intervenes and politics are left in the dust. Although what Heaney labels the "bounded condition" of life in Eastern Europe often results in a verse "too skeptical to be entranced," this restricted state also paradoxically "makes [Holub] all the more anxious to preserve his inner freedom." Heaney is particularly eloquent on Holub because Holub's dilemma would seem to reflect his own. It is a dilemma that could be described this way: how does one manage to pursue a "poetry of inner freedom" when it is incumbent upon the poet to respond to political events with the appropriate rhetoric? Heaney also may be writing half-autobiographically when he notes, in an essay on Auden, that Walter Raleigh's sonnet to his son was "written . . . under the shadow of public danger."

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The Czeslaw Milosz poem that Heaney discusses in "The Impact of Translation" forgoes any and all "visionary intent." Instead, there is a great deal of "unembarrassed didacticism," "speech truths we had assumed to be previous to poetry," and the wish to "deliver what we had once long ago been assured it was not any poem's business to deliver: a message"—all elements that would normally add up to a poem to which Heaney could never grant his assent. Yet Heaney does admire it; he locates the reason for his admiration in an extra-literary consideration:

> It counted for much that this poem was written by somebody who had resisted the Nazi occupation of Poland and had broken from the ranks of the People's Republic after the war and paid for the principle and pain of all that with a lifetime of exile and self-scrutiny. The poem, in fact, is a bonus accruing to a life lived in the aftermath of right and hurtful decisions. . . .

What Heaney seems to be suggesting in this remarkable quotation is that, if you are a poet, you had better have an unassailable reason for suspending the individual, imaginative side of your work. This lesson, if indeed it can be extracted from Heaney's words, would probably apply particularly well to American poets, politically the world's most indulged, so many of whom desperately seek extraordinary events to respond to in the manner of a Milosz or an Owen. The price of writing in what Heaney refers to as a "civil tongue . . . is a certain diminution of language's autonomy, a not uncensorious training of its wilder roots." As Heaney strongly implies, the only excuse for such a severe form of poetic self-denial is an overpowering political catastrophe.

All this having been said, however, it should be noted that Heaney is no extraterrestrial aesthete cut off from life's rich and varied pulse. Like the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert, whose " 'chanting of the air' " does not, as Heaney writes, "extend so far as to constitute a betrayal of the human subject," Heaney's defense of "Song" in no way diminishes his attachment to the world. What invigorates Zbigniew Herbert as a poet—and here, too, Heaney could easily be writing about himself—is a willingness to be "thrown back upon his native earth."

A "brusque domestic approach," which keeps the writer "close to the grain of the ordinary," is what also enhances the poetry of Osip Mandelstam for Heaney. Mandelstam's observation, in *Journey to Armenia*—quoted by Heaney in the essay on Osip and Nedezhda Mandelstam—shows just how much the Russian poet, whose greatest fidelity was to a highly metaphysical art, could learn from those who felt an aversion to it:

> The Armenians' fullness with life [Mandelstam wrote], their rude tenderness, their noble inclination for hard work, their inexplicable aversion to anything metaphysical and their splendid intimacy with the world of real things—all of this said to me: you're awake, don't be afraid of your own time, don't be sly.

Perhaps the fact that a poet as devoted to the imagination and to literary art as Mandelstam could be so moved by "the world of real things" emboldened Heaney to place at the center of his own poetry and prose an identical, and paradoxical, embrace of both "Song and Suffering."

In the criticism of both Seamus Heaney and Robert Pinsky we are in a world of constant shifts, as both poets move between distraction and disintoxication, between the uncanny and the real, between the rhythms of the mind and the furniture of life. Heaney's remark about Herbert is something with which Pinsky (and most of us, in fact) would probably find applicable to all true poets: he "is constantly wincing in the jaws of a pincer created by the mutually indifferent intersections of art and life."

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The drama of Madame Lebrun

Madame Vigée Lebrun Memoirs.
Translated by Lionel Strachey.
George Braziller, 233 pages, $24.95

reviewed by Deborah Solomon

We knew it all along: eventually we'd be hearing from Madame Vigée Lebrun. There were years, of course, when no one spoke of her, when no one thought to pull her paintings out of the storage racks, to brush off the dust that had settled thickly over her reputation. But who could be fooled into thinking she was gone? Given the current state of scholarship and the vogue for reviving forgotten reputations—particularly those of women, and of academic painters—it was only inevitable that Madame Vigée Lebrun, who qualifies abundantly in both categories, would be back.

And now she is. In the seven years since the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth organized a retrospective of her work—the first ever—Lebrun has been enjoying a new wave of popularity. She's even made it to Broadway: the protagonist of Wendy Wasserstein's latest play is a feminist art historian intent on rescuing Vigée Lebrun from obscurity. It seems appropriate that Lebrun would eventually surface on the stage, for the scholarship surrounding her career has tended to skimp on discussions of her work and treat her instead the way a playwright would—which is to say, as a dramatic character. Vigée Lebrun has been revived as a fantastic personality, and such is the interest in her life that the artist's *Memoirs*, a cream puff of a book first issued in Paris in the 1830s, has just been republished in this country.

Who was Elisabeth Louise Vigée Lebrun? If you had lived in the eighteenth century, you'd already know. Her life was nearly unbelievable. The oldest child of a minor portrait painter, she was born in Paris in 1755, and was already producing Salon-quality portraits by the time she was in her teens. She was summoned to Versailles by Marie Antoinette before she was thirty, and her portraits of the Queen assured her success among the fashionable people of Paris. Virtually overnight, she became the favored painter of the beau monde, and her work was showered with accolades. As a critic observed in 1783, "When someone announces he has just come from the Salon, the first thing he is asked is . . . : What do you think of Madame le Brun? And immediately the answer suggested is: Madame le Brun, is she not astonishing?"

With the outbreak of the French Revolution, the artist's fortunes only improved. Unlike Fragonard, who sat out the Reign of Terror in his native Grasse and then returned to Paris a destitute, forgotten man (he ended up working as a government clerk), Lebrun fled France the moment the mobs invaded Versailles and managed to sustain the trajectory of her career without the least difficulty. As Paris burned and her aristocrat-friends languished in prison, she hopped about the capitals of Europe attending grand balls, befriending monarchs, and enhancing her reputation as one of the leading portraitists of her age.

It is not unusual in the history of art to hear of a painter whose work, at first, was cordially received, or perhaps even highly acclaimed, but then, as the years went by and new styles proliferated, the reputation faded. Such was the case with Vigée Lebrun, and the reason is hardly a mystery. Simply put, she was not a great artist. She specialized in a kind of portraiture that perfectly suited the taste of her patrons, and it never seemed to occur to her that an artist doesn't have to pander to the values of his milieu. While some of her portraits are genuinely appealing—her best work has a sumptuous facility that hints at her admiration for Rubens—the success she enjoyed during her lifetime pushed her in unfortunate directions. Very often we find in her pictures, particularly the later ones, a level of sentiment (simpering children, kittenish girls with tremendous eyes) that invokes the

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tradition of academic painting in its most vapid and kitschy forms.

Eventually, Lebrun became known as a mindless flatterer—and nothing written about her career confirmed this stereotype more than the artist's own *Souvenirs*. In 1834, eight years before her death, Lebrun sat down to tell her life story, and as one who had lived through the Revolution, when her pictures were removed from the walls of Versailles and her name was slandered in the liberal press, her mood was defensive. The book she wrote was essentially a valentine to herself and her aristocrat-friends, and it clinched her reputation as a woman of outrageous self-regard who had no insight into the people or events of her time.

How ironic, then, that the very same memoirs that contributed to the collapse of the artist's reputation are now being offered as a key instrument in its rehabilitation. (The book, by the way, was initially issued in three volumes, in 1835 and 1837, and the latest edition is a reprint of an abridged version published by Doubleday in 1903 and translated by Lionel Strachey, no relation to the Bloomsbury clan. Yet another edition, this one unabridged, will be published in November by Indiana University Press.)

Memoirs, intrinsically, are the most one-sided of literary endeavors, but their one-sidedness can take two forms. There are memoirs that seek to correct history (in either a large or a small way); and memoirs that seek to distort it. The memoirs of Vigée Lebrun belong, unquestionably, in the latter category. To read her book is to be presented with an international cast of aristocrats and monarchs who somehow all deserve the highest praise for their elegance, affability, and pointed wit, their civility to servants, their "goodness of heart," "incomparable charm," "angelic sweetness," "extreme graciousness," "divine appearance"—the book is a parade of adoring phrases.

Lebrun's *Memoirs* were written by an artist, but they could have been written by anyone, really—anyone, that is, who had a chance to report on the famous people of the *ancien régime* and became swept up by it. It's easy for the reader to forget that, between the grand fêtes and endless suppers, Vigée Lebrun managed to produce roughly eight hundred portraits. How did she feel about her work? Did she see herself as belonging to any tradition? Did Neo-classicism move her one way or another? She was obviously a dedicated painter, but one would never know it from her memoirs, in which nothing seems to excite her more than an invitation from Princess Dolgoruki, or Count Cobentzel, or Lady Hamilton, or whomever. Take away the courtly titles and we're left with a book that bears an unmistakable likeness to the self-promoting celebrity memoirs nowadays crowding the shelves of our bookstores.

For all her admiration for high society, Vigée Lebrun harbored little warmth for the people who were closest to her. She hated her husband, Pierre Lebrun, a widely respected Parisian art dealer and connoisseur who, as depicted by his wife, was nothing but a vulgar profligate. (His "furious passion for gambling was at the bottom of the ruin of his fortune and my own, of which he had the entire disposal . . . .") If her husband squandered her substantial savings, his transgressions were slight beside those of the couple's one child, Julie Lebrun. When it came time for her to marry, her mother hoped she would snare an aristocrat—or, at the very least, the artist Guérin, who had no title but whose "successes in painting" made him a most attractive suitor. But instead she ended up with one Gaetan Nigris, a secretary at the Imperial Theaters of St. Petersburg, "a man without talents, without fortune, without a name." Vigée Lebrun was devastated. She tried to stop the marriage, but to no avail. And though she eventually forgave her daughter, "the cruel child showed not the least gratitude at what I had done for her in immolating all my wishes [and] hopes."

There is, I think, an element of comedy in the artist's bitterness toward her daughter—particularly since her best-known painting is a saccharine tribute to maternal love. *The*

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Artist and Her Daughter (1789), which is in the Louvre, shows Lebrun and her daughter tenderly embracing one another. While the girl is wearing a plain blue frock, her mother is dressed fashionably in a toga—so much the better for revealing the soft contours of her shoulders and the graceful sweep of her right arm, a gleaming white curve that links the two figures together. Lebrun, who stares directly at the viewer with the sweetest expression, has depicted herself as a goddess of motherhood (complete with Greek costume)—and I don't think I'll ever be able to look at this painting again without recalling the artist's anger at her daughter for failing to marry a prince.

But perhaps it's not fair to fault Vigée Lebrun for her lapses as a mother. She was a narcissist, a hypocrite, the most selfish of women—which of course she had to be to achieve what she did. Who else but an egotist could care so passionately about fashionable people? And Vigée Lebrun did care about her subjects; her fascination with high society was sincere. In her portraits, as in her *Memoirs*, she was more than beside herself with adoration. She consistently played up the charm of her sitters—she was famous for exaggerating the roundness of their eyes—while ignoring any details that might have provided some intimations of character. There is no irony in her work, there are no moments, as there are in, say, Goya, when the particularities of personality (beady eyes, a sinister smile) threaten to disrupt the veneer of elegance and reveal a person as he really is.

It is often said of Vigée Lebrun that she represents the last expression of eighteenth-century painting in France. Yet her work has virtually nothing in common with the soaring lightheartedness we tend to associate with the art of that age. She strove for a look of restrained elegance (the way they did in England), and in the course of her long career she never deviated from this approach. The problem with Lebrun's work isn't that it's lightweight. The problem is that it isn't lightweight enough. Her smooth, satiny surfaces, which are supposed to make the eye want to linger, instead send our gaze skidding across them; her surfaces are as characterless as her figures. Fragonard could paint a piece of drapery and make it seem like a living thing; Vigée Lebrun paints people as if they're as dull as drapes. Clearly she was drawn to the world of appearances, yet in glossing over details she all but erased them and left us with little to see.

Among the many ironies surrounding Lebrun is that her *Memoirs* should find their way back into print amid the celebration of the bicentennial of the French Revolution. As one can imagine, the maze of privileges enjoyed by the nobility didn't cause her to lose much sleep, and Robespierre had no place in her pantheon of heroes. To Vigée Lebrun, the Revolution was a lamentable accident that changed the world for the worse. "It is very difficult," she confides ruefully, "to convey an idea to-day of the urbanity, the graceful ease, in a word the affability of manner which made the charm of Parisian society forty years ago. The women reigned then; the Revolution dethroned them." Exactly what else the Revolution achieved (or destroyed) she does not say; as much as her paintings, her thinking seems untouched by the social and political upheavals she lived through.

It is exciting to be asked to discover an artist whom history seems to have overlooked. We all harbor a vague suspicion that history is not to be trusted, that masterpieces by forgotten artists are wasting away in dark, moldering attics. Yet, in the case of Madame Vigée Lebrun, the revival of her reputation seems so forced—so preposterous, really—it's almost enough to make one believe that history knows better than we do. Lebrun doesn't deserve to be brought back, not as a serious artist, anyway. Her portraits satisfied the demands of her society, but that society no longer exists. Her work has nothing to say to younger artists who are looking for direction and, judging from her memoirs, neither does she.

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Notebook

Why I left graduate school

by Elizabeth Connell Fentress

A few years ago I ended my graduate studies in English. I had gone back to school, admittedly, not for pure scholarship, but to gain a sense of how American literature was truly "American." For a long time before, I had assumed that European literature was, if not superior to its American counterpart, at least more sophisticated. But an interest in Flannery O'Connor, Jean Stafford, and many other American writers (Southern and otherwise) had eventually convinced me that there was a specialness to American literature. I thought it best to find out more about what had been thought and written on this side of the Atlantic for the past few hundred years.

I knew that upon formally undertaking study, I would be asked to take courses in English literature and language, and in critical theory. Naïvely, and willingly, I accepted those terms. Plodding through some ancillary courses seemed like a worthy enough trade-off for a two-year stint in the South, where I would spend my days reading, writing, and teaching at a place that had employed some of my favorite writers.

Thus I trekked south to the school near the banks of the Mississippi—to Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. I had been attracted there, in part, by the many eminent scholars and writers who had been associated with the school. I was reminded of them when I arrived by an essay that was anonymously placed in each graduate student's mailbox. It was a reminiscence by Robert Heilman entitled "Baton Rouge and LSU Forty Years After" fondly recalling the heyday of the LSU English department, when Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren taught there and the department published the *Southern Review*.

The *Southern Review* was launched in 1935 under the editorship of Brooks, Warren, and Charles Pipkin and quickly attained international respect; it was forced to fold only seven years later, in 1942, due to inadequate funding. The roster of literati published during those brief seven years is truly amazing: Robert Lowell, Delmore Schwartz, Katherine Anne Porter, T. S. Eliot, Ford Madox Ford, Eudora Welty, John Berryman, Caroline Gordon, Lionel Trilling, Peter Taylor, Philip Rahv, Sidney Hook, Eric Voegelin, Allen Tate, and many, many more. The list reveals an editorial policy that reached far beyond the regions of the South.

Why was this essay placed in our mailboxes? Perhaps it was purely nostalgic, suggesting a legacy to which we, the students, were somehow heirs. Yet the mise-en-scène I encountered when I arrived in Baton Rouge on that sultry August day in 1984 was not so different from the one Heilman describes. Architecturally and culturally, the LSU of the Thirties and Forties appeared almost intact. The legend of Huey P. Long was still alive, and the Southern kitsch of the deteriorating downtown was still visible. Even small

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details like the ubiquity of Coca Cola bottles (not cans) called to mind a past order. Nearly fifty years after Long's assassination, Louisiana's governor had just been indicted on charges of racketeering and conspiracy. I felt that I had been caught in a time warp.

But it soon became clear that something essential had changed, at least in the English department. The place where talk had once centered on the meaning and structure of a poem, where Robert Lowell and Robert Penn Warren had read Dante out loud during their lunch hour, where critics strived for originality of thought and clarity of expression—that place had vanished. The new focus of interest was quickly brought home to me by a professor who attended a party for students and faculty just as the semester began. "Faulkner," he announced, "is a bigot."

The irony was deeper than I then realized. In the 1930s, LSU had been a hotbed for the New Criticism; now important members of the English department saw themselves as messengers from Yale and other bastions of the new critical theory bringing manna to the benighted masses down South. But the true nature of the situation dawned on me only gradually.

During my first year at LSU I chose to take courses in literature from professors well known for their work in American (and British) studies. As the second year approached, what I saw and heard of the non-literature courses in the English department made me wary of them. The linguists and their protegés had no interest in literature, openly said so, and considered the literature students simpletons. One linguistics student, to prove the superiority of his breed, carried around a list of English department SAT scores as proof that those in his discipline were the smartest. The critical-theory courses ranged far beyond the scope of literary studies. An exercise in one theory course called for students to "deconstruct something." Triumphantly, one student told me that he had chosen to deconstruct the game "Trivial Pursuit" and that the professor had "loved it."

Throughout the year, a steady buzz about critical theories prevailed, and signs appeared again and again that a fault in the foundation of the English department was slowly opening up. One student talked of her urge to "shatter the text." Another, seeing a copy of William Barrett's *Irrational Man* in my hand, told me about a modernism seminar the previous semester in which he had listened to attacks on Barrett and his "outdated" ways of thinking. Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" was of course one of the crucial readings for that seminar. As I walked through the halls in the spring of that year, stark graphic posters with pulsating jail cell bars invited me to come hear Fredric Jameson, the famed Marxist critic who wrote *The Prisonhouse of Language*. At the local pancake house, a graduate student recalled, with a sigh, how wonderful it had been to hear *Paradise Lost* interpreted from a deconstructionist perspective.

In short, the compulsion to ride the wave of criticism was overwhelming, even to those who might have otherwise resisted it. Emerging from the library one day I bumped into a doctoral candidate, a favorite of mine, a man who had received his master's degree fifteen years earlier. He was coddling a huge stack of books under his arm. When I asked about his heavy reading load, he shrugged. "I gotta find out about this structuralism stuff." Another day one of the brightest people I've ever met—well versed in contemporary theory and the history of philosophy—confessed to me that his studies had faltered in other courses because he had had to spend so much time reading, and rereading, Adorno, Derrida, et al.

In thinking about such upcoming course work, I faced a difficult decision. If I chose to ignore the tidal wave of theory, I forfeited that dear document of endurance—the master's degree. If on the other hand I chose to dive into the muck and read my fair share, I betrayed my initial intention of returning to school, i.e., to concentrate on original works of literature. I was obviously at an impasse.

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In such a climate of confusion, it hardly seems surprising that LSU's "canon" (in this instance I merely mean the required reading for the master's exam) came under scrutiny. Some of the graduate students asked to meet with the director of graduate studies to update the reading list. The meeting began with a student scanning the list and questioning the large number of works cited under Matthew Arnold. The director then began, brilliantly, to quote a poem by Arnold. "You just try and match that," he threw out once he had finished. The poem stayed, but others by Arnold were eliminated. Later on the same student (who was under the spell of the Faulkner adversary) protested, "we need more blacks and women." Stated bluntly, the issue was clearly canonical *presence*, with literary merit trailing far behind. What was disturbing about this incident was the negative tone of the participants. Had any students come because of a *passion* for a neglected writer—for women like Virginia Woolf, Willa Cather, or Flannery O'Connor? For black writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, or Ralph Ellison? No. The motive was political, not personal, and the lack of enthusiasm for individual writers and works cast a gloomy shadow over the proceedings.

Another example of the misplaced enthusiasm for change occurred in the department's efforts to recruit English majors. Despite the fact that nearly every freshman in the university passed through the doors of Allen Hall for at least one course, fewer and fewer of those students ever returned seeking English degrees. Early in the fall, the department sponsored a talk on careers in English. In a room overflowing with students and faculty, a writer-in-residence talked self-importantly about his experiences selling scripts to Hollywood. Then he read off a list of job descriptions fit for English majors, all the while warning the students of how few writers in the world succeed. The constant references to his agent, his publishers, fame, and Hollywood were hardly the right sorts of enticements for prospective literature students.

It was not surprising that the department had resorted to recruiting sessions, however. For one thing, the essays that graduate students were required to teach in their freshman composition courses were intensely uninspiring. I recall assigning Russell Baker's "The Two Ismo's," a lighthearted essay aimed at New York sophisticates. Baker's essay caricatures two strains of today's man, the "machismo" and "quichismo" varieties. Few if any of my students—and I think this is to their credit—had any idea why the Keds-wearing machismo and the Italian-loafered quichismo were supposed to be such a hoot. I say to their credit because the foundation of that humor is fairly trivial . . . and the more I tried to explain the humor in Baker's examples (kiwi fruit and St. Bart's vacations versus chicken and Coney Island weekends) the more distant I felt from the students, who stared at me with blank faces. Baker's essay was published for the readers of *The New York Times*, and it should have stayed there. Unfortunately, the textbook had been edited by people whose idea of profundity was the Sunday *Times* and National Public Radio. Sandwiched in between such lightweight stuff were classic pieces of rhetoric by Jonathan Swift, Thomas Jefferson, and Martin Luther King.

The other collection of essays that was officially sanctioned for classroom use included a piece entitled "I Want a Wife," written by a feminist. She argued how wonderful it would be to have a "wife" to do all the tasks that she and other women have been burdened with for so many centuries. By the end of the year, I didn't blame the students for moaning and groaning: the essays were boring, forgettable, and occasionally an affront to one's intelligence.

Student teachers were also required, in their first semester at LSU (regardless of how many times they'd taught English courses elsewhere), to take a course in the teaching of composition and rhetoric. The course was both a forum for the introduction of teaching theories and a group session where novices and experienced teachers could

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exchange ideas and discuss problems. I'm afraid it wasn't taken very seriously; but it did reveal, inadvertently, serious problems at the very core of English pedagogy.

For example, a few teachers announced that they had banned all papers on religion and death, finding them too difficult to grade. Now, this is an odd restriction to impose on a group of freshmen most of whom come from the Bible Belt of northern Louisiana, the environs of Baton Rouge (where Jimmy Swaggart has his headquarters), or the predominantly Catholic parishes of New Orleans and the Bayou. Inevitably, one strain of pedagogy demands that students "search themselves" for writing topics. Yet once they've found one, they may find it on the banned list.

Our own required reading for the rhetoric course consisted mainly of journal articles on pedagogy, grading, and heuristics, the latter being the favorite buzzword thrown around by the "comp and rhet" people. Much of the class discussion centered on Aristotle's triangular model of rhetoric. Of course, there has been endless debate on who (or what) goes inside the triangle; the possibilities include reader, writer, text, teacher, subject, and student. Most rhetoricians would like to place "text" inside the triangle, as the epicenter of all rhetoric, but they get in fisticuffs over what to do with the reader and writer. As I waded through a pile of these articles, the reasons why Johnny can't write were clearer than ever.

As a term project for this course, each teacher/student singled out a problem encountered during the semester and presented a paper on it. The problem that intrigued me was threefold: one, the degree to which students wrote in the vernacular ("I mean, it was like . . ."); two, the difficulty of getting them to discuss the sample essays; three, the possible correlation between feeding students a poor diet of sample writings and the declining number of English majors. Could all these elements be related, I asked, to the art of reading? In offering a "solution" to the problem—as required—I maintained that we, the teachers, people presumably interested in poetry, fiction, drama, and criticism, should be allowed to teach directly from seminal works in all these genres. I invoked Flannery O'Connor by quoting the closing statement from her essay "Total Effect and the Eighth Grade," in which she commented that if a student didn't care for what he was required to read, "well, that is regrettable. Most regrettable. His taste should not be consulted; it is being formed."

O'Connor's remark, I think, gets to the heart of the matter, even if the word "taste" is not very fashionable these days. The response to my paper was, alas, predictable. I was told that my plea was actually retrograde, a return to the bad old days, to the "mimetic tradition," to the days, oddly enough, of Brooks and Warren. Clearly the New Critics, whose shining example had been outlined for me that first day on campus by Robert Heilman's essay, were passé. A further irony rests in the comment the professor wrote on the back of my paper: "If you mean that TAs [teaching assistants] should be given more freedom to teach literature in their writing courses," she wrote, "then be prepared for courses that teach more literature than writing . . . . If you mean that assistants should be allowed to teach literature instead of composition, then be prepared to give up your assistantship."

During this period, I often reflected on my own education. Although worthwhile in certain respects, it was not without its problems. Indeed, some of them foreshadowed the problems I would later find at LSU.

Throughout my high school days in Cedar Falls, Iowa, we certainly read and interpreted what are now called "texts." But reading wasn't all we did. For one thing, we watched a lot of movies. In a sophomore English class I remember watching a film of Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party" and writing in an essay test that I preferred the written version to the filmed one. The teacher kindly told me that I was supposed to like the film, that it showed a different view of the story.

As I remember this earlier time, images

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come to mind more often than book spines. One teacher devoted three class periods to a videotaped, televised docu-drama on Joseph McCarthy. I recall films on the social evils of the twentieth century, the heroes and demagogues of political movements, the 1968 Democratic convention, J. P. Morgan, Andrew Carnegie, and even one film about a boy who died from loneliness. The reliance on film then and the reliance on critical theory now strike me as parallel phenomena, for both can serve as a crutch to save the time and effort of explaining and engaging an event, a novel, a poem.

As an undergraduate at the University of Missouri, I was blissfully unaware that teachers could be partisans, that a political idea could affect their interpretation of events—that is, until I had a teacher whose views were too obviously skewed. In his American history class, we heard an inordinate amount about the greatness of the IWW, the value of social outlaws (Eric Hobsbawm was a favorite source), and the corruption of big business. The texts he used included *The Jungle*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Muckrakers*, and *Friendly Fire*. When I learned that the professor was an avowed socialist, I was hardly surprised.

But two other courses will always remain with me as examples of what a classroom could be. One, the history of twentieth-century Europe, was taught by a wise man from Central Europe. He used map after map (all the while grumbling about how dreadful American maps were) and made us read original works by Marx, Lenin, Churchill, De Gaulle, and Hitler. His insistence on going to the writings of the day by the leaders themselves engendered in me a healthy skepticism toward ideology and a respect for history that seemed much more profound than anything I gleaned from the other professor's ravings.

The second memorable course was actually a series of courses, part of a humanities sequence loosely based on the University of Chicago's Great Books list; hence, no critical materials were assigned. Teachers from all disciplines lectured on their areas of specialty and then conducted small discussion groups. For three semesters, I had a professor, William Bondeson, who believed students were capable of reading Homer, Apuleius, Nietzsche, and Camus without relying on secondary sources, who thought there could be an instructive relationship between a reader and a work of art, and who saw his role strictly as that of *agent provocateur*. After a year and a half I hadn't the slightest idea what Professor Bondeson's personal philosophies were. Whatever writers we were reading, he slipped into their cloak and argued from their perspective. For Aristotle, he persuaded us of the importance of efficient and final causes; for St. Paul, he preached the need of justification through faith and works; for Nietzsche, he convinced us of the reality of Apollonian and Dionysian temperaments.

Because most of my encounters with these books were first encounters, the intimate relationship with a book, *sans* theory, fostered a liberating sense of the art of reading. While critical theory can certainly enlighten students and deepen their knowledge, all too often, too *early* in a student's life, criticism substitutes for the necessary struggle of confronting the work itself. Students become too reliant on critical works before developing a way of reading and a confidence in their own judgments.

To what extent interpretation can become a limiting prism was demonstrated to me by a starry-eyed LSU undergraduate who had been taking a course in the twentieth-century novel taught by a Marxist. I asked the student if he knew his teacher's party line, and he replied that he did. He then remarked (after I expressed my reservations about the teacher), "You know, I'll never look at anything the same way again." What I found so disheartening about this remark was the way he said it—wistfully, as if henceforth he possessed some sort of gnostic vision that enabled him to see texts for what they really are: epic tales of the *petit-bourgeois*.

At least this student had made it to the upper-level English courses, having survived

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freshman composition. Most students didn't. The director of graduate studies in the English department even once referred to freshman composition as the "armpit course" of the department. With that kind of attitude at the top, it was hard for me to maintain the dedication that should accompany the grading of twenty-five essays every two weeks *and* to carry a full course load as a graduate student.

And when I reviewed what was in store for me as a student—courses in linguistics and critical theory—I was even more discouraged. I knew that I would be required to read a fair number of fashionable theorists, many of them deconstructionists. Stanley Rudicki, in his essay "The Loss of Art," writes quite accurately about the problems inherent in the deconstructionist approach to literature:

> These theories begin with the assumption that the literary work does not possess any relationship to an outer reality or for that matter to the author . . . . [D]econstructionists argue that all writing is reducible to an arbitrary sequence of linguistic signs or words whose meanings have no relationship to the author's intention or to the world outside the text.

If meaning was going to be demoted as another "outdated" view, I concluded, what's the point? If I couldn't teach what I thought was good writing, if what I read was to be explained away as inaccessible, why go on? I deemed it best to leave LSU, and to learn what I wanted to learn on my own.

The question remains: Who placed Robert Heilman's essay in the mailboxes? Obviously, someone wanted to ensure that students did have a sense of the past, and a sense of the valuable contributions made by former members of the English department. I for one am not an advocate of returning to a past order, and suspect that at least some conventions and attitudes from those days were discriminatory. But a good deal of the atmosphere of learning that one read about in Heilman's essay is missing today—and not just at LSU. It is a void I lament.

When I left LSU, I thought perhaps my reactions, unchecked, had been too severe. Then I received a letter from a former professor of mine there, a person I greatly admired and in whom I had never confided my misgivings until, in passing, I mentioned them in a letter. The thank-you note I received shocked me in its candidness about the doings at LSU and confirmed my uneasiness about what had been (and was) happening:

> Believe it or not, the emphasis on critical theory has mushroomed since 1985 to what I regard as incredible proportions, while courses in primary literature have fallen by the wayside. There was a concerted effort to do away with the Milton course *entirely* at the graduate level, and it took a major battle to keep it in the graduate program . . . .

On the brighter side, a school like LSU, which in 1984 had eighty-six people on the English faculty (not including graduate teaching assistants), has a much better chance of remaining diverse than some smaller schools.

But the final issue is larger than any one university. English studies are splitting at the roots, and those departments that fail to recognize that split—and seek to smooth things over by re-evaluating requirements, by examining textbook choices, and by wrestling with what constitutes a degree in English—will, I think, find a declining number of students knocking on their doors. As long as academics continue to practice their fission, dividing literature into scientific analysis and political theory and pushing questions of human nature further into the background, the pool of graduate students with a real grasp of literature will continue to evaporate. Too many good students will leave. Of those who will stay and put up with the nonsense, one can only say what Faulkner writes at the end of *The Sound and the Fury*: "They endured."

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Letters

Feminists and Edith Wharton

To the Editors:

Regretfully, James W. Tuttleton's "The Feminist Takeover of Edith Wharton" (March 1989) was brought to my attention and part of me would like not to dignify this "mean-spirited and condescending attack" (as Tuttleton calls that of one of the women in this article) with a reply. However, since Tuttleton's animosity was fueled to essay-writing force in large part by his attendance at a conference I co-directed as president of the Edith Wharton Society and editor of the *Edith Wharton Newsletter*, I feel obligated to counter his allegations. Moreover, by publishing his assertions in a non-academic journal, he knows general readers cannot assess his scholarship.

It would take another article to contest all his charges and readings, but I address what I see as two of his greatest sources of ire, the purported rescue by feminist scholars of Edith Wharton from the "neglect of the male literary establishment" and their appropriation of her life and fiction "to buttress the ideology of . . . feminism."

The first charge frankly surprises me since Tuttleton, long a commentator on Wharton, should welcome all attention paid, and had he joined the Wharton Society when he was so invited he would know that it is not a "sorority of feminists" in the frivolous or exclusionary sense, although all the women critics he mentions by name (except the two researchers) are active members. But other long and active members from the pre-Seventies world of critics are R. W. B. Lewis, Louis Auchincloss, Millicent Bell, Leon Edel, James Gargano, Richard Lawson, Margaret McDowell, Lyall Powers, and Adeline Tintner. The present president of the Wharton Society is a man and the bibliographer he cites as claiming that Wharton's status as major writer becomes most evident in recent criticism is also male. What Tuttleton also refuses to acknowledge is that all this attention has not brought Wharton into the front ranks of writers yet. Application for official status within the Modern Language Association, which has thirty-nine male author literary societies and four women author groups, was denied in 1986. The reason given—Edith Wharton is not a major author.

More important than this bickering over who discovered Wharton and when is the issue of the meaning of her work. And here I find outrageous and almost ludicrous Tuttleton's wholesale dismissal of all feminist attempts to read Wharton's eventful life and complex fiction as in any way exposing and challenging the long-held restrictions of women's lives. Actually, male critics such as Blake Nevius in 1953 wrote that "there is a lurking feminism in Wharton's brief" and R. W. B. Lewis, whom Tuttleton places (not totally accurately) in his conservative corner, pressed that Wharton "dramatize[d] the condition of women, which usually meant the repression and entrapment of women, in the social worlds she lived in" and concluded that "the victimization of women continued to be an important theme in Edith Wharton's fiction to the end." Yet Tuttleton protests the centrality of the women's question to Wharton's narratives.

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Puzzlingly, many of Tuttleton's own arguments, with their contradictions, spurious reasoning, and use of partially quoted evidence, could almost be added to the feminist cause. He himself first proclaims that "[Wharton's] life and art are testaments to how the limitations of time and place can be transcended, and her victories were celebrated in strong and independent heroines." (Any feminist would be glad to have written that observation.) But then he twists back to state "[t]his is not to suggest that she did not value the socially cohesive values of tradition and continuity especially in social relations." Discussing *The Age of Innocence*, he contends that Wharton's intentions were to show that "men suffer equally with women . . . especially in marriage, [in] such a limited social milieu." But again he presses that by her conclusion Wharton sanctions a marriage of convenience "as a decent life." Moreover, that these passionless arrangements with sexually innocent brides seem to have been abetted primarily by the women in society is supported by Tuttleton's truncated citation from the text: "a 'factitious purity' that had been 'cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses, because it was supposed to be what [Newland] wanted, what he had a right to . . . .'" Tuttleton of course ignores that this statement alone exposes that women appease and please what has been dictated by men. But most damaging to Tuttleton's assertions that Wharton's work can in no way "serve to buttress . . . an attack on men, their domination or cruelty" is Wharton's completion of this insight: "in order that he might exercise his lordly pleasure in smashing it like an image made of snow."

Most tellingly omitted from his plea for Wharton's social and sexual conservatism is the full range of themes and characters this modern woman writer exploits in her large and rich art. Although the ones he does mention—"the theme of the young woman's *ordeal* [my italics] in landing . . . a husband . . . and crucial instances of the superior woman entrapped in marriage to . . . [an] inferior"—are clearly women's issues, Tuttleton fails even to mention the bolder ones. He fails to enumerate the instances of would-be rapists and dope addicts, cruel and repressive husbands, in "The Bunner Sisters," *The Fruit of the Tree*, *The House of Mirth*, "The Lady Maid's Bell," "Kerfol," *Summer*, *The Mother's Recompense*, *The Buccaneers*; sexual repression in *The House of Mirth*, *The Reef*, and *Ethan Frome*; sex outside marriage, mistresses, consummated adultery, seductions and abandonements [*sic*] in *The Reef*, *Summer*, and *The Gods Arrive*; illegitimate pregnancies in *Summer*, *The Old Maid*, *The Gods Arrive*; incestuous implications in *Summer*, *The Mother's Recompense*, *Twilight Sleep*, *The Children*; and finally the boldest of all, the graphic and erotic depiction of sexual foreplay itself, not merely between a man and woman but between father and daughter, in "The Beatrice Palmato Fragment." These works Tuttleton realizes would prove harder to convert into what Wharton called George Eliot's later weaker fiction, "hymns of respectability."

Moreover, if Tuttleton were really interested in a full and open exchange over a women [*sic*] author's concerns, he would have quoted the feminist critics who see woman's plight in Wharton yet support some of his contentions. Wai-chee Dimock concludes: "Wharton's critique [in *The House of Mirth*] . . . is essentially an aristocratic critique, a critique from the standpoint of 'early pieties' and 'inherited passions and loyalties.'" Analyzing the narcissism of the entire American culture in the same novel, Joan Lidoff posits that "[t]he primary motivations that determine the plot are not actions with or among men, but feelings of resentment and revenge among the women." And Lidoff tests all actions against her belief that "marriage is more than a literal solution for Lily and the plot: it is a symbolic affirmation of maturity." Even one of Tuttleton's *bete noirs* [*sic*] among feminist literary critics, Elaine Showalter, claims that "[i]t is often overlooked that Wharton develops a whole cast of male characters in *The House of Mirth* whose dilemmas parallel those of the women." And she too concludes that "the hope of continuity, rootedness and relatedness [are what] Lily finally comes to see as the central meaning of life."

Even when Tuttleton resorts to Wharton's essay writing in her *French Ways and Their Meaning* for statements of conservative ideals, he fails to mention her espousal in this work of the more equal relationships of men and women in French society, or despite some of her own

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reservations, the French culture's acceptance of adultery. Wharton wrote: "[Since] love is not grave enough to form the basis for marriage [according to the French] . . . they allow it frankly and amply, the part it furtively and shabbily, but no less ubiquitously, plays in Puritan societies."

What makes Tuttleton's intolerance for the feminist interpretation of Wharton intolerable is his nasty, snickering, and condescending portrayal of all feminist theorists. He fails to discriminate among them and lumps them into one monolithic anti-social, anti-family, violently upheaving voice which threatens to alienate men and "make over our society in a female image." Or worse he sets them in coffeehouses dreaming of "a utopia . . . of sexual . . . equality," flexing their muscles in self-confessions, and boosting *Ms.* magazine as their political manifesto. Again, his own essay undermines these playground tactics. Frequenting cafés, thumbing through magazines, and plotting utopias did not produce the formidable and varied writings of feminist thinkers that Tuttleton now imagines threatening Wharton and him.

But I should be as naïve as Tuttleton pretends about Wharton's full output and feminist convictions if I really continue to assume that his intentions are open dialogue about literary interpretation, Wharton's reputation, or even the question of women in society. When Tuttleton concludes his arguments by smearing all feminist literary positions with McCarthy-like tactics and right-wing rhetoric, calling their true purposes not literary or "new" but "political" in "the radical socialist egalitarianism of the Enlightenment and in the Marxist extrapolation," then what has really been exposed is Tuttleton's true purpose. All has been a thin disguise for espousal of his political ideology, for the propagation of his ultra-reactionary platform, with its investment in preservation, or if necessary re-entrenchment, of traditional arrangements that favor white male domination in sex and politics.

What infuriates me even more is not the hypocritical political bias of Tuttleton's article but that it was he who wrote in an academic journal a persuasive diatribe against those professors who use literature and text not for "art and or aesthetics" but for "extra-linguistic [purposes]," which Tuttleton correctly read as "conversion of the mind of the student to the ideology of the theorist." Tuttleton, a professor of American literature, protested that "[l]iberal democracy . . . cannot survive without the university's pursuing a disinterested inquiry into the best that has been thought and said in the world." I then applauded his aims. But my age of innocence is over, no house of mirth awaits. I now know "disinterested" in literary criticism to Tuttleton means a thin disguise for his misogynistic and ultra-conservative ideology. I now see that tyranny can come from the Right as well as the Left. And while I remain strongly committed to open and democratic literary and political discussions and means, each in its place, I shall better understand those who cry, "Allons, enfants."

Annette Zilversmit
Professor of English
Long Island University
Brooklyn, NY

To the Editors:

In "The Feminist Takeover of Edith Wharton," James W. Tuttleton discusses "The Shock of Non-Recognition" (*TLS*, December 16-22, 1988), my analysis of R. W. B. Lewis's treatment of the sources for his life of Wharton.

I doubt that impartial readers of my article share Mr. Tuttleton's opinion of its tone and cogency, but for people who have not seen it I juxtapose a statement by him with the relevant passage in the article. He writes:

> According to Ms. Mainwaring, she had no opportunity to read and correct the Paris chapters of *Edith Wharton* in page proof; hence, Lewis's errors survived into the published biography and have propagated errors in subsequent Wharton criticism.

What I in fact wrote was very different:

> Lewis asked if I would read his Paris chapters in manuscript. I agreed, and was expecting to receive them when instead I received the published book. The texture of those chapters is fairly represented by the samples given here. To deal with a given error and leave a viable phrase, passage, chapter would often have been impossible.

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However, it is not Tuttleton's inaccuracy that is at issue, but Lewis's. And the point about Lewis's errors is that they cannot be corrected in simple linear progression; they serve as bases for other errors, more complex, they riddle his versions of materials *not* provided by me, and they affect his interpretation of documents which call for sensitivity and insight.

To wonder why I waited so long to expose some of his errors is natural and reasonable. A footnote explaining the delay was deleted from the *TLS* article in the course of editing; I am glad of this opportunity to give the reasons.

The article is in its essentials a critique written in 1975. I had done research for Lewis throughout 1969-70, in principle working gratis half the time and being paid for the other half. Though I did not quit the job till September 1972, I spent almost all of 1971-72 writing a book on Turgenev (published in 1973), after which I began a book on Morton Fullerton, Wharton's lover. The new book was "announced" in London and New York journals in the customary letter reporting authorization and requesting information.

In 1975 Lewis's book appeared. It stunned people who knew the sources, especially Mary Pitlick in Washington and myself in Paris. Lewis's praise of my work was well intentioned. But the work, largely done at my own initiative, had been arduous and scrupulous. To see it mangled was not amusing, and Lewis's thanks implicated me in mistakes and distortions of his which would eventually be discovered and would be attributed to me.

I immediately wrote a critique setting forth the facts as I knew them. But I was persuaded by friends to withhold publication so that I could finish my own book and be undistracted by controversy. Insofar as that book overlapped Lewis's, it would document a true narrative rather than merely attack a false one. To have it on record that I was not responsible for his errors, I sent copies of the critique to various people in France, the U.K., and the U.S.

I expected to finish my book in perhaps two years, but it was only in rough rough draft when, in 1977, work had to stop. Severe shingles and sequelae, a broken hip, and care of two ill and aged parents and disposal of their house after their deaths made it impossible for me to carry on sustained, demanding work. Though there was nothing I wanted more than to be able to get back to the book, I could not do so until the end of 1985.

I also returned to the critique, expanding some citations and updating references to writers. It was meant for the *TLS*; but in 1987, at Richard Howard's insistence, I sent it (in a form somewhat different from the one now in print) to an editor of *The New York Review of Books*. It was ignored, as were letters of inquiry. By contrast, the editors of the *TLS* saw misrepresentation of data by an academic as an important issue and gave generously of their time and space.

I am very sorry that scholars have been misled by Lewis's errors. My own work also suffered from a long delay that was beyond my control.

Because I call one book written by a woman "incisive" and say that another will correct certain misconceptions, Tuttleton concludes that my article is part of a concerted feminist "turn" in Wharton criticism. I am a feminist in the measure that every rational modern man and woman must be a feminist; but if there is a "takeover" I am not associated with it, and if Tuttleton describes it fairly I agree with much of what he says. But surely *any* doctrinaire reading of history or literature is deplorable, whether feminist, anti-feminist, "leftist," or conservative; and no "ideology" ennobles attacks which, ignoring the issues, rely on arguments *ad hominem*.

Marion Mainwaring
Boston, MA

James W. Tuttleton replies:

Professor Zilversmit's letter wonderfully unmasks what is wrong with criticism in the academy today. It would be easy to answer it, point by point. But something more important has been disclosed to readers of *The New Criterion*.

From this utterly malignant *ad hominem* smear, readers are in a good position to see what it costs *anyone* nowadays—but especially the white male English professor—to question the race-class-gender ideology of left-wing "oppression studies": unfounded accusations of hypocrisy, misogyny, racism, and ultra-conservative right-wing "tyranny" and of wanting "white male domination in sex and politics"—that is, I suppose, the sadistic re-institution of women as chattel. I am surprised that Zilversmit didn't claim

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that I want to re-enslave blacks, bomb abortion clinics, and nuke the whales while I'm at it.

This is terrorist vilification, plain and simple, but radical blacks, feminists, and Marxists dish it out all the time—in faculty meetings, at conferences, and in what passes for "literary criticism." It won't work. A critic must always respect the literary evidence, even if the texts are not in harmony with her political sentiments.

I am pleased to hear that Ms. Mainwaring dissociates herself from the feminist takeover of Wharton studies, and that she deplores doctrinaire *ad hominem* criticism. And I stand corrected that it was the manuscript, not the page proofs, of *Edith Wharton* that she had no opportunity to see.

Sienese storytellers

To the Editors:

I am astonished that a publication as devoted to quality and excellence as *The New Criterion* could offer in the guise of serious criticism so transparently personal and vicious a diatribe as Creighton Gilbert's "Sienese Storytellers" (April 1989). I am personally offended that Professor Gilbert's long wait for an opportunity to vent his spleen with John Pope-Hennessy should end with the pretense of reviewing "Painting in Renaissance Siena," an exhibition and catalogue with which John had no direct involvement, notwithstanding Professor Gilbert's aberrant contention that "the very many citations to him in the catalogue substitute, in effect, for those by the curators." (I am here guessing at Professor Gilbert's very unclear meaning.)

It would appear that Professor Gilbert is equally content with the opportunity to disparage Keith Christiansen, the curator of the exhibition, who is contemptuously not once referred to by name in his "review." Neither Carl Strehlke nor myself were "curators" of this exhibition; we collaborated on its catalogue. Furthermore, as a matter of correcting factual error, my doctoral dissertation was completed at the Institute of Fine Arts in New York under the direct supervision of John Pope-Hennessy (a role, I trust, he does not find the slightest bit "undignified") and does not even peripherally concern "the visit by the outside painter Signorelli to Siena near the end of the time span of the exhibition." It may now be customary to forgive errors of fact on Professor Gilbert's part when he refers to works of art, but as the bulk of his "review" is based on pedantic criticism of what he considers insufficiently academic terminology and method and on what he clearly perceives to be inadequate academic credentials on the part of the exhibition's three cataloguers, he might at least be expected to check facts regarding important purely academic concerns.

I am also astonished by Professor Gilbert's ingenious rationalization for refusing Keith Christiansen's invitation to study the Griselda Master's *Faith* at the Metropolitan Museum. Because he could not study it "independently and repeatedly" he chose not to study it at all. This seems to me highly irresponsible behavior on the part of a scholar who proposes to publish on the artist. The same scholar is also preparing a study of Luca Signorelli's frescoes at Orvieto. How much more remarkable, then, that he should decline an opportunity to study the remains of a drawing "unmistakably related" in style to that artist's work (not, I hasten to add, unmistakably by him, as Professor Gilbert seems to think "related" infers), or that he should feel Signorelli's influence in Siena amounted to nothing more than a digression when in fact it was more widespread and long-lasting than had been that of two other "outside" artists a generation earlier: Liberale da Verona and Girolamo da Cremona, whose presence in the Metropolitan Museum's exhibition surprisingly elicited no objections from Professor Gilbert. I am left to wonder whether graduate students at Yale University are now being encouraged by Professor Gilbert's unorthodox example in the pursuit of scholarship, or whether his influence there is simply a "digression."

Laurence B. Kanter
Curator, Robert Lehman Collection
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
New York, NY

To the Editors:

A recent Hilton Kramer editorial advocated the ban of movies from university classrooms (*The New Criterion,* February 1989), noting that

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students go to the movies in any case. Now, in "Sienese Storytellers," Creighton Gilbert throws another stone at popular culture by deriding museum exhibitions of Christmas-candy art, implying, I suppose, that most museum visitors send Christmas cards anyway. When Old Master art becomes popular, is this sufficient reason to suspect its merits?

Gilbert's review of the "Painting in Renaissance Siena" exhibition in the April issue hardly contains a single example of level-headed criticism, and his dislike for Sienese quattrocento painting is so pronounced that one wonders why he bothered to waste eleven pages on the exhibition at all. The greater part of the "review" is a biased and incorrect accounting of the career on the scholar to whom the exhibition was dedicated, John Pope-Hennessy. Several years ago Gilbert indulged in the same sort of tangent in an article about the same critic's Luca della Robbia monograph, but that was at least about a book Pope-Hennessy wrote. Gilbert's reasons for this sort of behavior are only known and best kept to himself. Although Gilbert seems to think that the show does no one any honor, he questions Pope-Hennessy's achievements in the field in which it at least tries to honor him. John Pope-Hennessy is in fact an internationally acclaimed scholar of Sienese fifteenth-century painting and his work on the subject dates over a fifty-year period.

Only a few of Gilbert's observations on the exhibition, catalogue, and curators that merit correction can be mentioned here. First, he insinuates that the authors of the catalogue, myself included, have not previously published enough on the subject to undertake such a project, when in fact we have all published more than Professor Gilbert, who has only marginally touched upon the Sienese quattrocento in his own publications. Secondly, he fantasizes that the description in the book's acknowledgments of Laurence Kanter and myself as "pupils" of Pope-Hennessy leaves our "official thesis supervisors and other teachers there in a slightly undignified role." This observation envisions a narrow definition of the teacher/student relationship, but it also implies a pettiness on the part of my dissertation advisers, Professors Beck and Davis at Columbia, of which they cannot by any means be accused and to which I hope Gilbert's own students at Yale are not subject in their personal transactions with him. As for Laurence Kanter, he conducted his dissertation research under Pope-Hennessy's direction.

During the exhibition we learned that the reconstruction of the Giovanni di Paolo predella for the Lehman Coronation was different than proposed. Gilbert sees our lack of foresight on this point as a fault of the exhibition and our scholarship, whereas this is exactly the sort of information that can be learned only in the context of an exhibition in which works of art are brought together and examined closely. Many new things were learned about other works of art in the exhibition and only because of the exhibition. It is a hands-on approach to art history and one of the most rewarding.

Gilbert voices his dislike for the artist Domenico di Bartolo, but it is incorrect to state that the reconstructed detached fresco of the Virgin of Mercy was displayed at "the margin of the show." It was the first object to be viewed once the visitor started making his way around the gallery, and is an important example of Sienese religious imagery and devotion to the Virgin. In Siena it was so popular that when, in the seventeenth century, renovation necessitated destruction of the wall it was painted on, the fresco was detached and carefully preserved.

Toward the end of his article, Professor Gilbert questions the "humanistic contextual knowledge" of the curators' educational background because he found a misuse of the word "cherub/cherubim," which in any case is used correctly in many other cases throughout the catalogue. He reminds us that cherub is put in the plural form like kibbutz is made into kibbutzim. This shows that Gilbert has plenty of chutzpah, but I doubt his charge can be used as a serious enough indictment of our education. He too is known to let a slip go by: for example, in "Sienese Storytellers" he makes mistakes about the sex of Langton Douglas's progeny, Federico Zeri's first name, and F. Mason Perkins's birthplace.

Carl Brandon Strehlke
Adjunct Curator, John G. Johnson Collection
The Philadelphia Museum of Art
Philadelphia, PA

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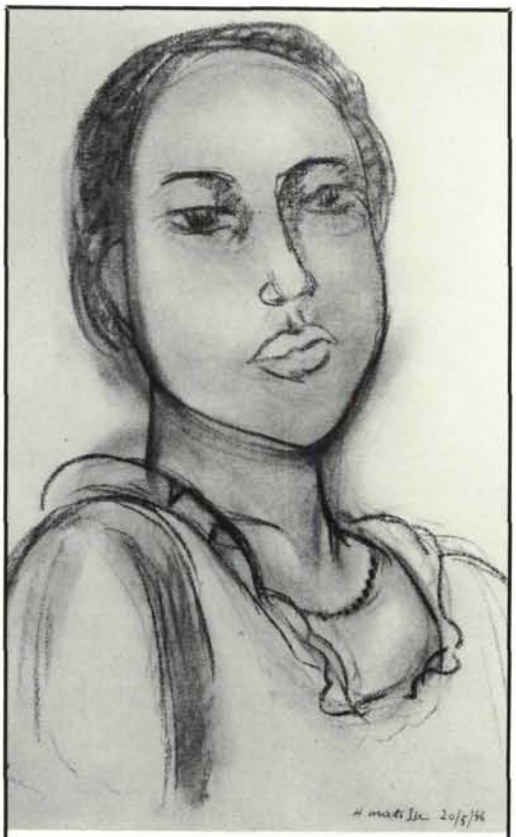

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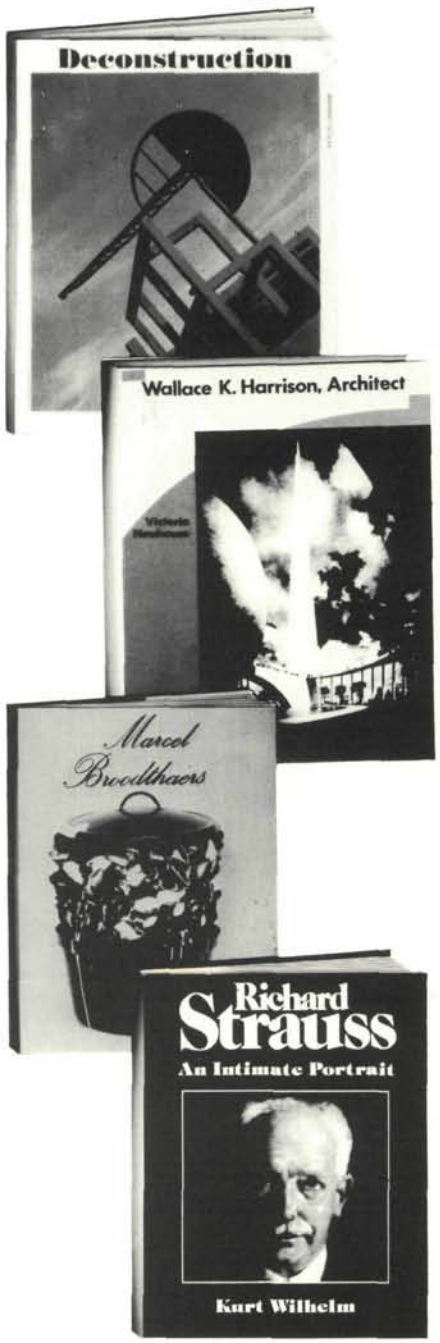

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